


FEAR!



MAY 1960 35 CENTS

NIGHTQUAKE!

MUTE,
A CHILD WAITS FOR THE TASTE,
THE FEEL
OF THE TERROR
HE CANNOT SEE.

A BUBBLING TEST TUBE
WAS THE FLESH
OF HIS DREAM WORLD
BUT OUTSIDE LURKED...

THE VANDAL

BONUS!

A WILKIE COLLINS HORROR CLASSIC



Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . . until they try my method!



But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that most fishermen say are fished out and come in with a good catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, or seining. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes — twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers — but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too — in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they were public guides, they

rarely divulged their method to their patrons. They used it only when fishing for their own tables. It is possible that no man on your waters has ever **seen it**, ever **heard of it**, or ever **used it**. And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish within a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the country and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to those men in each area who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your local waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money. Send your name for details of my money-back trial offer. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic — until you decide to try my method! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIC A. FARE, Highland Park 33, Ill.

ERIC A. FARE, Highland Park 33, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from waters many say are "fished out," even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

FEAR!

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Green wished that in this first year of his principalship at Danesburg Public School the other teachers had given him as little bother as Miss Pratt. Not once had she sent to his office a "disciplinary problem" with an explanatory note clutched in a small hand. She seemed to be in complete control of the situation. Of course, he hadn't observed any of her classroom activities—there simply hadn't been time—but on fire drills he'd been astonished by the poise of her first-graders as they assembled with military precision on the half-acre of lawn in front of the school.

He recalled, too, the frequent school assemblies. From the auditorium stage he'd observed the other teachers constantly having to finger-snap their wriggling, babbling charges to temporary stillness. But the two long rows seating Miss Pratt's pupils were always as quiet as suspended animation, while Miss Pratt—relaxed in her aisle chair—contemplated the program, her waxen face reflecting detached pleasure.

As Green rounded the bend in the corridor, he looked at his watch. It was 11:55. Rather than interrupt, he would wait at the side entrance to Miss Pratt's room until she dismissed her class for lunch.

He stopped just before the threshold of the open door, not more than four feet behind and a little to the left of Miss Pratt's desk. All he could see of her was the bun of white hair above her bony neck and shoulders as she sat with her spine rigid against the back of her chair. Green could see most of her desk's surface from the angle of the doorway.

Beyond her desk in the bright, high-ceilinged room sat the children—as quiet as forgotten puppets. Almost mesmerized, their eyes converged on Miss Pratt; she was monotoning an arithmetic lesson in her New England twang that was at first so strange to Danesburgian ears.

Yet there was one youngster who lacked his classmates' interest in the lesson. The Principal recognized him as the transfer he had signed in this very morning. The six-year-old's blond head swept back and forth, his blue eyes following an enormous, lazy green fly as it buzzed from corner to corner of the room. Then it zoomed, loud as a bumblebee, to the window directly behind the boy. He spun about—creaking his desk—to watch it walk slowly up the glass pane.

"That will be all, class," said Miss Pratt. "Richard, will you please come to my desk? The rest of you may go to lunch."

Not a single chair scraped the hardwood floor as the children snapped to their feet almost as one. Row by row they marched out of the room.

Timidly, the new pupil approached Miss Pratt's desk. The teacher rose slowly from her chair, her spine remaining perpendicular to the

DEUS EX MACHINA

by MARTIN WEINGARTEN

DAMN! It served him right for wearing new shoes on a day when he had so much walking to do. Principal Rudolf Green hobbled wearily down the corridor, the ceiling above him bisected by a perforated line of long, dim bulbs. A drop of perspiration teased its way down from his freckled bald head, over his forehead, onto the bridge of his nose. From the tailored jacket that admirably cloaked his paunch, he withdrew a Kleenex and rubbed away the tickler.

It had been hot—but not quite this hot—an hour and a half earlier when he started out with the gray cardboard box under his arm containing 26 envelopes, each bearing a teacher's name in the Principal's own compact script. Inside were the contracts for next year. When the number of envelopes dwindled to five, he took them out and discarded the box in a corridor trash bin.

His moist right hand now held the single remaining contract—Miss Pratt's.

floor as she did so. The boy's head tilted backwards so that he could see the face of the towering, thin structure. She didn't utter a word. Green counted 30 ticks on the wooden framed clock hanging over the door beyond which he was standing unobserved.

Then she began in her mechanical tone. "I see such pretty blue eyes . . . and you know what? . . . they seem to be telling me something. Do you want to know what they tell Miss Pratt?"

"Y-yes, Ma'am."

"Yes, *Miss Pratt*."

"Yes, Miss Pratt."

"That's better . . . you're no longer in the South. Well, those eyes say that Richard wants to be a good pupil in Miss Pratt's class. Isn't that right?"

"Y-yes Ma—Miss Pratt."

"Very well. Do you know how to be good in class?"

"I-I think I do."

"Then what must you do?"

"I must pay attention . . ."

"All the time—and keep those pretty blue eyes right up here and sit like a little bump on a log, just like the rest of Miss Pratt's little soldiers. Do you think you can remember?"

"Yes, Miss Pratt, I think so."

"Well, Miss Pratt wants to be *sure* you do."

She picked up her black patent-leather purse and clicked it open. She withdrew a tarnished silver box, which she placed on the outside left corner of her desk. Richard's eyes riveted upon it.

"Open it," she said.

Richard reached out a trembling hand. His teeth bit down over his lower lip as he lifted the lid and peered into the box. Green strained his neck, but from where he stood, he could make out only the exterior of the box. Suddenly the boy's eyes widened; his mouth gaped. A gurgle of horror echoed from deep in his throat.

"Pretty, ch?" she chuckled.

The boy stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the interior of the box. A trickle of saliva glistened on his small chin.

"And now, you'll be like all my other little soldiers." Her bony index finger snapped down the lid of the box; she picked it up. "You may go to lunch now, but be in your seat promptly at one o'clock."

"Yes, Miss Pratt," he whispered.

Green strode into the room. "Just a moment."

Her head twisted to the side like that of a startled bird. Her blanched

face was flecked with brown; close-set over a tiny aquiline nose, her small black eyes glowered with fleeting rage.

"Young man," Green said, "you trot down to my office and wait for me. I'll only be a minute. I want to have a little talk with you."

The boy nodded and hurried out of the room.

The church clock across the street struck noon. Green felt the cold sweat trickle down his trembling legs. His fingertips burned. From outside in the corridor came the boisterous, suddenly-released voices of hungry children leaving classrooms for lunch.

Miss Pratt smiled, revealing perfect false teeth. "I was getting acquainted with the new pupil," she said calmly. "I was showing Richard a family heirloom. He's a bit undisciplined, but so sensitive to beauty." She started to insert the box into her purse. "Why, he was fairly enraptured with . . ."

"Miss Pratt, I would like to examine the contents of that box."

"Why, land's sakes, there's nothing at all inside it. It's just an old . . ."

"If you please." He reached out his hand.

She hesitated. "Why of course." She smiled again and offered the box to him. His hand brushed against her chill fingers as he took it.

It certainly did look old enough to be an heirloom. It was about three inches high, two wide, and four long. On its top was a white circle on which there was a faded painting of a shepherd serenading his love. Green turned the box around and around. Then, with his thumb firmly pressed down on the lid, he turned the box upside down. An inscription on the bottom read: MADE IN SWITZERLAND. DO NOT OVERWIND. Under the admonition was a tarnished silver key.

The Principal righted the box and set it down on the desk. He stepped back and took a deep breath. Then, at arm's length, he slowly lifted the lid. The insides were corroded black with, here and there, a glittering souvenir of the former silver plate. But the box was empty.

"You see," Miss Pratt said, "it's just an antique snuff box. It's been in the family over . . ."

"I don't know how you accomplished this illusion."

"I'm quite sure I don't know what you're talking about." The fine black hairs jutting from her arched nostrils quivered.

"I saw it all. Oh, I imagine you could have gotten away with your distinct variety of pedagogy almost indefinitely. Most of the children would be too frightened to breathe a word to anyone. Maybe if there were a few braver children who did risk speaking to their parents about it . . . well, naturally they wouldn't believe it. Of course not. Chalk

it all up to a six-year-old's vivid imagination.

"Then when the child reached adulthood, no doubt he'd laugh it all off, philosophizing on the remarkable phantasies of the infantile mind—but thanks to you—" Green's voice cracked—"he'd probably be emotionally crippled for life."

"Really, I . . ."

"I'm afraid your teaching career is all washed up in this neck of the woods. And you can be sure that it won't be easy for you to get a position anywhere else, with the report that will be tagged on your record."

She looked at him in silence, her face a shade paler.

"I consider this contract rather superfluous," Green said. He tore the envelope five times. Silently, she watched the ragged white squares snow down into the wastepaper basket by her desk.

"I shall write the head of the School Board concerning this matter today. As for the few weeks of the school year remaining—I have no choice but to let you finish the year—I strongly advise you to discontinue your present tactics. I shall keep a close watch on you. If you don't heed my warning, there will be the law to deal with."

He turned abruptly to go out, then faced her again. "Perhaps I'd better take this along with me." He picked up the box.

She stood as gaunt and silent and immobile as a Tussaud effigy.

As Green stepped into the corridor, he had to wade through the throngs of disorderly, laughing youngsters swarming from the rear of the building.

"Mr. Green, Mr. Green," came a voice as piercing as a tea-kettle whistle. It was Mrs. Bradley. She *would* be wanting to discuss another problem student at a time like this.

"Not now," he said brusquely. "See me about it first thing in the morning."

"But . . ."

He rushed on, weaving his way down the corridor. As he turned the corner he collided with a little girl. She fell and started sobbing. He picked her up, muttering, "Sorry," and hurried on. Finally he reached his office at the end of the wing. The boy was sitting in the straight chair at the side of Green's desk in the dim, hot room. The Principal switched on the overhead light.

When the boy saw the tarnished box in Green's hand he paled. His hands gripped his thighs, fingernails gouging the flesh under corduroy trousers.

Green sat down behind his desk and put the box on top of the polished mahogany surface. His heart was thumping and he was still

breathless from the dodging, clumsy scurry back from Miss Pratt's room.

"Now, young man," he said as calmly as he could, "let's just have a little talk. I was outside the door all the time. I want to know what frightened you. At first I thought it was something in this box, but it's empty. See?"

Green put his hand on the lid.

"No!" The boy leaped to his feet.

"All right, I won't open it. But just remember, there's nothing inside this box that can hurt you. What you saw or think you saw was some kind of trick. You know, the way magicians pull rabbits out of hats."

Richard looked from the box to Green's face, mutely calling him a liar.

"O.K., Richard," he said, patting the boy on the shoulder, "you can go to lunch now. But promise that you'll come tell me if anything like this happens again."

"Yes, sir." Richard bounded out of the office.

The Principal sat behind his desk, immobile, his head pounding. He took two aspirins from the box in his desk drawer and gulped them dry, swallowing five times before they went down. Even then, phantom lumps stuck in his throat. How long had this reign of terror been going on here in Danesburg? Well, he'd soon find out.

He paced rapidly to the next room. Miss Jennings, the school clerk-typist, was munching a sandwich while she read a paper-back novel.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your lunch hour, Miss Jennings, but it's urgent . . . Would you please get me the file on Miss Pratt?"

"Yes, sir." She put down the remains of her sandwich and wiped scarlet-tipped fingers on a paper napkin. Then she rose and clicked on high heels to the file cabinet. The drawer squeaked open and her fingers flew over alphabetized indexes, past manila envelopes.

"Mr. Green, it isn't here. There isn't a file on Miss Pratt . . . She's been teaching here a long time, hasn't she?"

He groaned audibly. "Couldn't it be out of place, misfiled?"

"Yes, sir, it could . . ." she said doubtfully.

"Then please make a diligent search. Put aside all other work and report to my office within an hour. I *must* locate that file!"

"All right, sir."

He trudged back to his office, wondering. He'd consulted other teachers' files during the year; they'd always been there. Sitting down at his desk with a loud sigh, the Principal picked up the box and opened it. It looked the same—an old, simple music box. He put his hand un-

derneath and turned the key until it would turn no more, but the box remained silent. The works must be corroded, he thought, as he put it down on his desk, still open.

Lord, it was hot! Green turned on the small electric fan and took off his jacket and tie. His sweat-drenched shirt clung like a transparent skin. He rolled up his sleeves, then glanced at the framed color photo of his wife and five-year-old twin sons. In just a few more weeks all this would be over and they'd be away at their lakeside place enjoying sunshine and swimming. Best of all, he'd have some time to spend with Marge and the kids.

But this was no time for revery. The first thing would be to write Anderson. He took a sheet of stationery from his desk drawer and started to write:

Dear Doctor Anderson:

I feel compelled to write you personally concerning the extraordinary manner in which Miss Amelia Pratt conducts her first-grade class. It is my opinion

"Mr. Green?" He looked up to see a mailman standing in the doorway.

"Special delivery insured letter, sir. You'll have to sign for it." The postman came to the desk and Green scrawled his signature. He looked at the pink, note-sized envelope the postman handed him. In a clear, round hand it bore his name and school address. He turned it over and read the addresser's name: AMELIA PRATT.

"You know," the postman said, "I got a daughter in fifth grade in this school. Name's Johnson. Been wanting to have a talk with you one of these days. I think her teacher don't give her class enough discipline. I don't know about this new-fangled progressive education . . . I been in Danesburg only two years . . . we come up from Benton . . . but we like it here. Only it's a pity they don't go back to the old-time, sensible ways of teaching. When I was a boy . . ."

"Yes, I'm sure. But you'll have to excuse me. If you'd like to make an appointment for some other time, perhaps . . . I'm very busy at the moment."

"Sure thing."

Green picked up the letter as soon as the postman turned to leave. He hesitated before opening the envelope. What the devil was that woman up to? Why go to these lengths when her room was only around the corner?

He tore the envelope open and pulled out a rose-scented sheet of note paper, folded in half. He snapped it open and read the following:

Dear Mr. Green,

I wish to express my profound appreciation for your decision to nominate me for the Merit Award. I shall do my utmost to live up to the confidence you have shown in me.

Yours sincerely,

AMELIA PRATT

The woman was out of her mind! He started to double up the note in his fist. Then he thought it would be better not to destroy any possible evidence of her incapacity. He put it on his desk and placed a paperweight on top. He wiped the perspiration from his face and picked up his pen to continue the letter to Anderson ". . . *that she is one of the most . . .*"

Hell! The pen was dry. His fist crashed down angrily on the desk. Everything on it jumped a fraction of an inch.

He heard a clicking sound. Jarring the desk had activated the music box mechanism, and in metallic plunks a little tune was being ground out. It sounded familiar, except that it was much slower than it should have been—some of the notes were a little off. There was probably something wrong with the gears.

The Principal's mind flashed back to his youth, when he had listened to his mother's musical powder box play the *Blue Danube Waltz*. But this box had quite a different melody, although he only vaguely recognized the tune. Then he suddenly remembered where he'd heard it—it was one of the songs that his sons played over and over on their little red wind-up phonograph, one of their favorites. But there were words to the song. In the back of his mind, there was the murmur of a childish soprano voice singing and a string being plucked intermittently on a scratched 78 rpm disc. What was the song about? He couldn't remember. . .

At any rate, such idle thoughts were not helping him with the problem at hand. He reached out his right hand to close the box. Then on impulse he picked it up and brought it to the edge of the desk, cradling it in the palm of his hand. With his other hand he switched on the gooseneck lamp and twisted it down to a few inches above the box. He tilted the box toward him slightly. The bright light revealed, in one black corner, a small slot leading down into the works.

He saw the thing whirl up from the slot. It looked like a grayish-yellow droplet of dirty motor oil—about a quarter of an inch in diameter. *No eyes.*

As soon as Green spied the thing his entire body was shocked by an overwhelming cramp. Instantly, every drop of blood seemed drained

from his body. The muscles of his left cheek convulsed, twisted upwards. His left eye snapped shut. His mouth drooped slack, a silvery thread of saliva momentarily spanning contorted lips.

His body and thoughts were frozen.

Yet his right eye moved, compulsively following the thing as it propelled itself spastically across the bottom of the box on protrusile transparent, needle-like legs. It crawled up the side of the box and onto his thumb.

Through his paralysis he felt the sting and vibration, like a tiny acid-coated motor.

In rhythm with the metallic plunk of the box clutched vise-tight in the Principal's hand, the living horror pulsed up the underside of his thumb to his wrist. There, over a prominent vein—suddenly resembling a green vine under the thing's grayish-yellow transparency—it began its deliberate ascent.

Icy perspiration glossed and matted the long, fine hair on Green's forearm. The thing was climbing inexorably upwards. It reached the point just above his elbow, where it encountered the folded shirt sleeve. It stopped. Five seconds later it thrust itself halfway under the fold, then reversed itself, and pulsed over the sleeve. It continued upward over the white shirt, and, even through it, Green felt the acidy itch and throbbing.

The eye strain was excruciating as the thing approached his shoulder. Suddenly it was gone from sight. It scurried onto his collarbone, over his throat.

Just as his mind and body had become paralyzed upon first viewing it, he was free the instant it was out of range. He felt a surge of strength—the blood returned to his fingers and they released the box. It thudded to the top of the desk on its side, still open and playing. His left eye opened slowly as his facial muscles relaxed.

A desperate thought flashed through his liberated mind. *Brush it to the floor. Step on it. Kill it!* He raised his right hand toward his throat, where it now pulsed.

Suddenly it hove into sight on his right cheek and once again the cramp shook his body, rendering him helpless. The Principal's right arm hung immobile, his rigidly distended fingers—frozen in clutching motion—three inches from his throat.

Green's right eye jerked painfully in magnetic pursuit of the animate blotch as it pulsed up the tip of his nose. It dropped onto his upper lip. All he could see was a faint whirl of yellow, like dirty egg yolk. Even this vanished and then he felt it on his upper teeth!

In a second it was on his upper lip again, vibrating, stinging. It moved out onto his right cheek, circling over and over, around and around.

As it moved upward, closer to his eye, the circles became smaller. All the while, the music box played its little tune. Abruptly, through deeply fogged consciousness, something penetrated Green's mind. The tune was about a spider that crawled up a spout . . . *"Teensie weensie spider went up the water spout—down came the rain and washed the spider out . . ."*

The thing was momentarily invisible as he felt the sting and vibration on his underlid. Then came the yellow-gray shadow across his eye, blotting out all images. It had stopped on the lens of his eye—dead-center over the dilated pupil.

From the distance he heard the click of approaching high heels. "Mr. Green, I've found the file on Miss Pratt. Funny thing, it was in the—Mr. Green, what's the matter?"

The agony was sudden, sharp. Blood mingled with the tears coursing down his cheek. The shadow was gone. A yellow, magnified Miss Jennings loomed into sharp focus, as the Principal looked out through the living, throbbing lens.

"Mr. Green, you're ill. Let me—"

Miss Jennings' image faded into a grayish-yellow screen as transparent needles stabbed deeper and deeper, toward Rudolf Green's brain.

From June 29, 1959 DANESBURG GAZETTE-TIMES:

Miss Amelia Pratt, first-grade instructor at Danesburg Public School is the recipient of this year's Merit Award for "Best Teacher of the Year," with commensurate increment in salary.

Although the recommendation was never officially put through because of Principal Rudolf Green's sudden death from a cerebral hemorrhage, sufficient evidence exists to support the belief that her nomination was his last wish.

Miss Pratt, 58, originally from Salem, Mass., has been teaching in Danesburg for the past 36 years. Upon being presented with the award by Dr. Robert Anderson, head of the School Board, Miss Pratt made the following statement:

"I was indeed shocked to hear of the sudden demise of so young and understanding an administrator. I sincerely hope that next year, when I shall be teaching the twin sons of the late Principal, I can live up to the esteem in which he held me."

DUST TO DUST

by **ALFRED SNEIDER**

JOE THREADED his way through the darting kids that were using the street as a playground. It was a dirty street in a dirty neighborhood and heavily overpopulated. Maybe that was what brought the dirt—and the kids. Every morning, weather not withstanding, they came spilling out of the ramshackle houses into the street to risk their necks in generations old games. They scampered under the wheels of cars, hurled themselves over sharp-pointed iron pickets, hung from precarious heights and rolled on the concrete as though it were feathers. Everybody wondered how they got through their childhood but nobody did anything about it. Joe didn't mind their impeding his progress, but he was in a hurry to get home and to Connie—Connie meant home.

He looked up at the square three-story frame building where he lived and shook his head. The architect sure hadn't extended his imagination when he designed the whole row of houses, everyone alike. He must have used an orange crate as a model and stuck in floors and rooms where it suited his convenience. There wasn't one flattering line anywhere and the rectangular porches bulged out on the streets as though threatening to disgorge their contents on the heads of the

kids playing below. Functional design, Hell!—Joe thought. The trailer of his truck had more eye appeal. Well, they wouldn't be living here much longer—that was the only consolation. If only that damn delaying contractor would finish the house he had promised them, that would solve a lot of problems. He had a fat down payment on it and was all set to move in. But when—when? When would the good word come? This stinking neighborhood was all right when they were first married, but they rated better now.

He hustled up the three narrow flights of squeaking stairs, threw open the door and dropped his canvas bag in a corner of the dark foyer. "Hi!" he yelled walking through the apartment. "I'm home."

"In the kitchen, Joe—" Connie called.

He hurried in and kissed his wife affectionately, patting her on the rump for good measure.

"How goes it?" Joe asked—"everything all right?"

"Sure," she said—"how was the trip?"

"As usual," he shrugged. "Still a lot of headaches with traffic—the Thruway helped some. Joseph okay?"

"Of course," she laughed at him and walked over to the sink to finish preparations for supper. She adopted a peculiar listening attitude there and barely heard Joe finishing the sentence:

"—left about two o'clock. He must have pushed hard all the way to make such good time."

"Who?" she muttered, snapping out of the trance. "Who?"

"Sam—" he said half exasperated, pointing to the wall. "Sam Saperstein—Sam from next door."

"Oh yeah," she muttered and ran the water harder, camouflaging the rest of her sentence. What did Sam mean to her?—he was just a good neighbor. Right now she had more important things on her mind.

Joe rooted around in the refrigerator and backed out with a frosted bottle of beer. He was just opening it when the porch shook, swayed: the floor trembled.

"There's Sam now," Connie said.

The entrance door from the porch swung open and an immensely squat man stood there, his powerfully gnarled arms hanging to his knees. He saw the beer in Joe's hand and licked his lips. "You can pour out one of those for your old buddy," he said. "Hi Connie! How's everything?"

"Fine," she said—"how's Lisa and the children?"

"Those kids—" Sam shook his head in mock resignation and drained off a glass of beer leaving the foam on his lips—"they drive me

crazy. I have to come over here for a little peace and quiet."

"You're a lucky man," Joe grinned. "—five kids. They keep you active."

"They sure do," Sam said wonderingly. "When they ain't trying to tear the house down, they're trying to carve their old man up. And me such a delicate character."

They laughed at that. Sam and his truck were built along the same specifications.

"What's new from the dispatcher's office?" Joe asked. "I got in late."

"That's what I come over to tell you about. Tomorrow's your last haul to Buffalo for awhile. After it, you go on short runs."

"Thanks, Sam," Connie said gratefully. "I know you arranged that."

"Think nothing of it," Sam growled. "A guy's gotta help out his buddy in times like these."

"Have another beer," Joe pressed. "You rate it and a whole lot more."

"No, I gotta go. They're waiting supper on me. See you kids."

"You know who to come to for favors," Joe yelled after him.

"Sure, sure."

That night after dinner Connie told Joe about Miss Piety, the landlady who lived on the first floor. "—she says we'll have to pay the rent right up until the end of the lease. It doesn't matter if we have a new house or not, she still wants her money."

"Hey!" Joe protested, "she'll get somebody else to live in this fire-trap and then she'll be collecting double rent for at least five or six months. What does she think we are—a coupla dopes? We got better things to do with our money than swell her bank account. Tell her she can go whistle for it."

"That's what I told her," Connie snapped. "But she says we signed a contract and have to live up to it. We have to pay. I told her we didn't but she said it's legal. I was ready to slap her. She's got most of the money in the world and she wants it all."

"You stay away from her," Joe said. "I don't want you bothering about it. I'll handle it when I get back from Buffalo. Just ignore her, there's agencies set up just for—"

His voice faded from her mind, she couldn't hear him anymore. Her eyes grew dull, withdrawn, she found herself staring into a red fog that blanketed the room. And there, in the middle of the mist, was a small white worm. It started wriggling.

Connie! Connie! Can you hear me, Connie?

"Yes, I can hear you, Joseph."

Well, what are we going to do? We can't let Miss Piety away with this.

"Joe says he'll handle everything."

Don't make me laugh. You know what he'll do—write letters, run around asking questions and end up dragging lawyers into this. They cost a lot of money—money that we need. And Miss Piety is just mean enough to fight us in court. That'll cost more money. No, this has gone beyond the talking stage. There's really only one thing to do.

"But what can I do, Joseph? Joe doesn't even want me to talk to her."

Stop the nonsense. You don't want to leave it in his fumbling hands. You know what has to be done—tonight, when everybody is asleep.

"Connie! Connie, are you listening to me?" Joe cried sharply.

"Of course I heard you," she murmured.

"Well you seemed so far away. I said for you not to worry about it anymore. I'll take care of it."

"All right," she said, "I'll leave everything up to you."

She lay awake in bed that night, staring into the dark—and making plans. It was quiet, restful and her mind was crystal clear. She wasn't worried any more, there was no need to be. Everything was being taken care of. Then the red fog started drifting in, pushing out the blackness. Soon it overwhelmed the room and there was nothing else left. Then the white worm moved.

Wake up, Connie. Wake up!

"I'm awake, Joseph."

All right, it's time to go. I'll help you.

She listened to Joe's regular breathing and carefully slid out of the bed so as not to disturb him. The old slippers would do, she thought, and drifted through the apartment like a wraith in her white nightgown. The door was well oiled and made no protest when she opened it. Crawling down the stairs with thumping heart, all the way to the cellar, she managed to avoid the steps that squeaked. She should be able to do that after climbing up and down them thousands of times. Now just where was that tire iron she had seen? Oh yes, in that half-ruined baby carriage sitting in the corner. There was some old burlap there, too. Good. Wrap the tire iron in the burlap.

Back at the first floor, Connie listened at Miss Piety's door and started smiling. The old witch slept like the dead—yes, the dead. She should be tired out after poking her nose into everybody else's business all day long. Well, she was about to get her last poke.

Connie slipped the tire iron alongside of the lock. One quick jerk backwards and the wood splintered, the door swinging free. Junk, she thought—nothing but junk like the whole house. Who the hell did Miss Piety think she was trying to prevent them from moving into a decent place? Nothing was going to stop them—nothing.

Connie glided past the old-fashioned furniture and into the bedroom. The noise of snoring acted as a directional beacon. There was a head, outlined in the dim light, like a grey bundle on the white pillow case. Her arm went up, holding the tire iron.

No, no, wait! Take off your nightgown. You'll have blood splashed all over it.

"Ooh, good! I never thought of that."

She held the tire iron in both hands and smashed down, pivoting from the hips. She swung again and again, caught up in a sudden fury. The pillowcase wasn't white anymore, nor was the head grey.

Wash off in the bathroom. Then make it look like a robbery. Find an old pair of gloves if you can.

"Thank you, Joseph. That's a good idea."

It certainly was. Money always comes in handy. And Joe would think she was wonderfully economical when she presented it to him and told him it was savings out of her allowance. She found the pocketbook easily enough and rifled it—felt like some real money in there, too. The silly fool—she had a reputation for carrying large sums around in that beat-up bag. The beat-up bag, Connie laughed to herself. "Did you hear that, Joseph?"

Yes, I heard it. But don't think an old miser like Miss Piety would keep all her money in her pocketbook. She probably has a lot more somewhere else. Probably under the mattress.

Connie ran her hand under the mattress and discovered wads of crumbled up, old dollar bills, greasy from body oils and sweat. "Why how wonderful of you, Joseph. There's quite a bit of money here. My wonderful, wonderful Joseph."

Everything was perfect, just perfect. Joseph had outwitted the police all the way. Connie had gone back to bed after seeing Joe off with a good breakfast in his stomach. She had barely gotten to sleep when a heavy pounding came on the door. Of course it was the police wanting to ask a lot of questions. It was easy answering them and it all added up to exactly nothing.

"Who is it. Oh, the police. Well, I can't let you in, you've just got-

ten me out of bed. Miss Piety! Good heavens, you'd better come in. Wait 'till I get dressed.

"No, I don't know a thing about it. This is the first I've heard. When did it happen? Last night! Why we slept straight through. Didn't hear a thing. Imagine that—a horrible thing like this happening just two floors away. No, my husband left early this morning for Buffalo. Won't be back for three days. Miss Piety? No, I didn't like her much—I don't think anybody did. But that's not a reason for killing a person. If it were, I guess there wouldn't be many people left alive in this world. Why yes, she was supposed to carry large sums of money around with her but I couldn't know much about that—I never saw it. No you're right. I guess I don't know much about this horrible murder. I can't think of anybody who would have a motive. Perhaps one of the young boys in the neighborhood heard she had a lot of money. I wouldn't put anything past some of them. You know this isn't the best neighborhood in the world. What an awful thing. I wish I could help you some more but I just can't. I hope you leave some policemen around to guard us. We don't know who's wandering around out there planning to murder us all. Thank you, I just wish I could help more."

That was pretty smooth, Connie thought. The police were running around in circles and had not even the slightest of suspicions about her. With that additional money she had hidden under the sink, her worries were over. So were Joe's. So were Joseph's. And so were that old witch's called Miss Piety. She'd never make trouble for anyone else again; deny them the basic pleasures. She deserved what she got.

Soon now, she and Joe would be moving into that new house and then she'd start living the good life. It would be like a dream of Heaven to live in a decent place, breathe some fresh air, have a little room around you where your neighbors weren't on top of you. Not that Sam wasn't a good neighbor—he was. But even if you had neighbors you didn't care for out in the suburbs you could ignore them. At last—they were going to live like swell folks. Maybe even some day Joe would own his own truck or a fleet of them and they'd have a houseful of kids going to swank schools. Maybe—some day. But nothing nor no one would stop them from their first move.

Joe came out of the police station mopping his brow. He thought there for a moment that the cops were going to play rough. They were damned mad and determined to catch Miss Piety's murderer. Sure it was a shame but it wasn't any skin off his nose. It looked bad, though, that he had left so early that morning. Luckily his trucking company

had backed him up. They always pulled out early on the Buffalo run. Still, Joe knew he wasn't crossed off their suspect list—not by a long shot. Aw, what the hell, they didn't go around hanging innocent men—at least not every day. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but he decided to ignore it.

He turned into his own street and had to dodge around the kids running everywhere. Well, that'd be left behind and he couldn't say he was sorry. Out in the country, kids had some room and didn't use parked cars for bases or foul lines. And they grew up healthy and strong.

There was that stinking shack he lived in, dilapidated looking as ever. One of these days the whole thing would fall into the street and good riddance to bad rubbish. There was Connie up on the porch, looking for him. Don't let it fall now. He waved at her and ran into the house.

"Hey!" he yelled, busting straight through into the kitchen, "I'm home."

She was waiting for him at the sink and returned his kiss with a good deal of fervor. He stood back a little and looked at her. Her color was high, her breathing fast. She seemed on edge, high strung.

"You're all right, aren't you?" he asked worriedly. "You're not sick or anything?"

"No, no," she said. "I'm all right. It's just that—oh I don't know," she paused out of frustration and inability to describe her feelings. "I guess I'm just nervous."

"Sure, sure, I understand," Joe consoled, putting his arm around her shoulders and hugging her. "I guess you got a right to be nervous at this time—and now with Miss Piety and the police and all. But from here on out I'll be home every night to take care of you. We'll be moving into our new house soon, so you can forget about this dump and everybody who ever lived here. It'll all seem like a bad dream."

"It does already, Joe," she laughed a little. "You might as well sit down. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

The whole evening Joe worried about her, but tried hard not to show it. After dinner, he told her about how the cops had put him through the wringer and made a joke out of it. Then they put on the television and sat down to watch it, but he didn't really see it. That something was nagging at the back of his mind and wouldn't give him any peace. He just couldn't put his finger on it and it tore at his insides, knotting them up.

Finally Joe gave up in disgust, got into his pajamas and headed for

the kitchen and a bottle of beer. Connie came in with her nightgown and slippers on. Then it hit him all at once.

"Connie," he said with elaborate unconcern, "That night that Miss Piety was murdered—I remember you crawling out of bed. Where did you go?"

"I guess I went to the bathroom," she shrugged.

"No," he shook his head. "You didn't go to the bathroom—or the kitchen either. I would have heard you. You must have left the apartment. Where did you go?"

"I got out of bed," she cried, "—so what? I don't remember where I went. It's not important."

"Maybe not," he insisted, "but the next morning your slippers were leaving black marks on the linoleum—like you had been walking in coal dust. What did you want down in the cellar at that hour of the morning?"

"What's going on here?" she suddenly raged. "Have you got chains on me or something? Do you have to know where I am every minute? Are you going crazy or what?"

"I'm not going crazy," he said slowly. "But the police know that somebody had been in the cellar before killing Miss Piety. They found coal dust all through her apartment. Then I find it up here. What am I to think?"

Connie's face flared red, then went dead white. Her breathing deepened, increased, as she struggled for control. "Look Joe," she said earnestly, "I'm your wife. I did it for us, don't you understand that? Can't you see what that woman was trying to do to us. I had to do it, she forced me into it—it was for us, Joe—for us."

Joe wavered as though he had been punched. His face was ashen, drawn. He had suddenly grown so much older. "You're sick, Connie," he said kindly, putting his hands around her upper arms. "You need help—it was only a matter of a few months' rent. Put on your clothes and we'll—"

The red fog crashed around her, the white worm in it wriggling frantically.

Connie! Connie! He's trapping us. He wants to shut us up in such a horribly small room that it would make this ugly place look like a palace. We'd never even see the sky again.

"I know it. Joseph. What do we do now?"

We can't let him shut us up. Make him listen to reason.

"I tried that—it didn't work. Maybe if I explain to him about you—"

No, no, absolutely not. Nobody must ever know that we can com-

municate. That would be fatal. There's only one thing left.

"What's that, Joseph?"

I can only give you advice, Connie. You're the active member of this partnership. But no one would ever blame you. You could say that it was in self-defense. Everybody would believe you.

"—they'll take good care of you, Connie, and you'll be out in no time. You'll hardly even know that you've been away."

Connie's head lowered, sunk between her shoulders until he could only see the whites at the bottom of her eyes. She reached behind her towards the rack of carving knives and her voice was soft, deadly. "You're not going to lock me up, Joe," she whispered and moved slowly forward like a stalking cat.

"Connie," he pleaded, retreating. "You're not well—put down the knife."

"No—no—no—no," she repeated monotonously, following him without letup.

"Please, Connie, please. It's me, your husband, Joe."

She lunged quickly, straight ahead and he barely had time to move his body out of the way. His hand caught the blade of the knife, its sharp edge slicing through the flesh and tendons in his palm. Instinctively he reacted, muscles following an almost forgotten pattern. He judo-slashed to the side of her neck. She staggered, unconscious; he caught her and lowered her gently to the floor, his half severed hand saturating her gown. He whipped a kitchen towel off the rack and bound it tightly around his wrist as he stumbled onto the porch.

"Sam, Sam," he bellowed, "call an ambulance. Don't ask questions—just call an ambulance." Then he fainted.

Lieutenant of Detectives Minnehan walked down the hospital corridor, a bit shaken inside. He had seen a lot of grisly sights in his career, but a raving insane woman always shook him. Sometimes he wished he had never signed that application for the police department. They had the poor woman strapped to the bed, pumped full of dope; but she was still spitting, foaming at the mouth, trying to bite anyone who came too close. From her screechings, they had pieced together a good bit of the story of how she had killed Miss Piety. Funny though—she kept raving over and over that Joseph told her to do it—and she wasn't referring to her husband. Him she always called Joe. That was one big unanswered question. What the hell, these nuts—who could figure them?

He pushed open the door to the room where they were keeping her

husband after the operation on his hand. A doctor was still bending over him, but straightened up when he saw the detective and came outside.

"How is he?" Minnehan asked.

"Fair, fair," the doctor said. "He lost a lot of blood but I think we sewed up everything in his hand. Only time will tell."

"I got a few questions I'd like to ask him."

"Well—he's had a bad shock and is under a sedative. I wouldn't want you to disturb him too much."

"I only need a minute—it's important."

The white-haired doctor thought a moment, then nodded his assent. "Under those circumstances I guess it's all right."

"Swell—thanks doc."

The lieutenant went into the room and over to the bed. He stood staring down at Joe and noticed how the sedative had made pin-points out of his eyes. Those same eyes revealed the grief the man was going through. Minnehan hoped that Joe would never have to see his wife strapped down to a bed in such an awkward position so that the mattress could bear the weight of her swollen abdomen.

"Joe," he whispered gently, "we're taking good care of Connie. Try not to worry about her too much. They think they can cure her and give her back to you."

"Thanks," Joe mouthed laboriously.

"There's just one thing that's bothering us," the detective asked. "What does the name 'Joseph' mean to Connie?"

Joe licked his lips, his throat moved involuntarily as he struggled for speech. "It's—it's just a nickname. Just a nickname for the baby she's going to have next month."



Josephus

by **ARTHUR PORGES**

SPRAWLED out in the sun-drenched field between the tall, golden cornstalks, Janie prattled on, certain of a sympathetic listener.

"You know, Josephus," she said, digging her heels into the crumbly, fragrant loam, her normally piquant face grave, "I'm not really hard to get along with. That's true, isn't it?"

Josephus apparently agreed, for he said nothing.

"Gramps and Grandma like me all right. They even want to adopt me." She squirmed eagerly at the thought. "Golly, won't it be great if they keep me here on the farm with you, Josephus?"

A huge dragon fly, ecstatic in the heady sun, alighted six inches from Janie's face. She watched it with a shivery delight. The stiff, iridescent wings were wholly lovely, but the reptilian, armored body, rippling with alien rhythms, seemed sinister and menacing. She drew back nerv-

ously, and the winged jewel launched itself into flight with a noiseless rustle.

"Gee," she breathed, "there's more things on a farm. I just gotta stay here, Josephus—and Aunt Ellen—she'll never let me. I know it. She just won't."

Far out, beyond the ripe field, old Blackie led his flock of crows in an intricate aerial maneuver. "Caw! Aw-w!" the testy veteran execrated his followers. Obviously the exercise was unsatisfactory. Still voicing his displeasure, Blackie ordered the group to try again. They disappeared finally, bound, no doubt, for a raid on the adjoining farm.

"I'll bet that's old Blackie and his bunch," Janie said. "Grandpa's tried to shoot him for years and years and years. So've all the farmers. You hate crows too, don't you, Josephus? I don't hate 'em much—I think they're kinda pretty, so black and shiny. And I like the way they live, so free and all. But if you hate 'em, I guess I better. You know, Aunt Ellen's just like a crow in some ways. Even Mommie and Daddy, before—before it happened, they called her a nasty old crow once. I remember that. But I didn't even know about crows then: I was so little." This contemptuously from the maturity of her ten years.

"An old crow, always in black, shiny dresses, and with her face real pointy, and tiny, birdy eyes. Like that dead crow I found here yesterday. Gramps said it must of died of sickness. I told him how it was all rolled up in a ball—ugh!"

She stiffened abruptly at a distant hail, shrill and peremptory. "That's Aunt Ellen, and I'm not supposed to be here! I guess she doesn't want us to be friends, Josephus, but I don't care; she can't stop us. We'll always be good friends." And standing on tiptoes, Janie planted a moist kiss on the scarecrow's painted cheek. Then she sprinted for the house.

When she returned the following afternoon, her eyes were red. "Hullo, Josephus," she said in a listless voice. "Did you have a hard day? Were there lots of crows to scare away? I wish I were a scarecrow myself. It's fun here in the field, I bet. Of course, there's winter—I wouldn't like that." She paused, slender throat working convulsively. "Know what, Josephus? I have to say goodbye. Aunt Ellen won't let Gramps and Granny adopt me. I knew she wouldn't—I said so, didn't I? Before that I was just trying to make you feel good—when I pretended we'd be together. I know how lonesome you are out here with nobody to talk to, or anything. If I was living on the farm, I'd keep you company. Besides,"—shyly—"I'm kinda lonesome, too. It's real bad of her—real bad! And Grandpa says you're a *good* scarecrow. He

says you're the best scarecrow in the whole county. The crows won't come near his farm, Grandpa says. Even old Blackie stays away, and he's the worst of the lot.

"If I could live here, I'd help you chase away the crows. Honest I would. But Aunt Ellen—I don't know why she won't let me stay. She doesn't love me one little bit. Mom and Dad wanted Grandpa to have me if anything ever happened. I heard them say so one night when they thought I was sleeping. I tried to tell the judge. Know what I think, Josephus? She doesn't want to lose the *money*. She gets a whole two hundred dollars a month of Daddy's money for me! I hate her! Old black crow!" Quietly then, "I'd like to kill her. If she was dead, Grandpa'd take me—I just *know* it."

After a brooding silence, Janie said: "Course I couldn't keep you company at night, even if I lived here. But I suppose you sleep then, don't you, Josephus? Or is that when you walk around? It must be awful hard standing in one place all day. Nobody can blame you for walking around at night. Anyway, they don't know. You're always so careful to come back to just the same, same spot. But I can tell. Yesterday your left boot was just touching that big, blue stone; today it's not. Course, the wind blows you so—your arms and legs are awful fluttery.

"What do you do at night, Josephus? I bet you have a good stretch first, and it feels wonderful. Like getting up after a nice sleep—a real sleepy sleep; you know what I mean—smelling the bacon and pancakes. And then you run down the corn rows, scaring off rabbits and coons, kicking out with those big old boots. And when everything is chased away from Grandpa's corn, maybe you walk down to the creek for a long, cool drink. It's awful hot here in the sun all day, I bet. They said I shouldn't ever drink from the creek—it's p'luted—but that wouldn't hurt *you*."

She jumped up and grabbed one of the scarecrow's clumsy hands, a ragged cloth glove stuffed with straw. "See, this is still damp. You dipped up water in it last night, didn't you, Josephus? But I don't know what you drank it with; your mouth's only painted on. Gee, Joey—this glove's all dirty and goeey-brown.

"If I could stay, I'd wash your clothes. All of 'em, I would. No, I'd get you new clothes, even white gloves. Wouldn't that be peachy? Golly!" She stood tall in a strained position. "Who's coming? It's Aunt Ellen! I better scoot, Josephus. She'll tan my bottom again. I promised not to come here any more. She's mad at you, too. Bye!" Her slight form vanished among the towering plants . . .

Aunt Ellen, hot and sticky in her black dress, felt a pang of disappointment as she glimpsed the scarecrow. There was no Janie about after all. Surely the little sneak must have come. Where else could she be? Her thin lips tightened, so that the clumsily-outlined lipstick stood out like a painted mouth unrelated to her own. The child was around somewhere. Would it be worthwhile to try to catch her? Should she try?

The sun was so strong. Maybe if she just crouched down here where she could watch the scarecrow, Janie might be trapped. A rather silly lot of trouble, but it would show the maudlin old grandparents that Janie was a lying brat. They were siding with the girl again—the entire atmosphere was quite unpleasant. She'd planned to spend another month on the farm—you saved money, and it wasn't bad here—but their absurd attitude was making it impossible. The child would soon be unmanageable.

She sat down stiffly, reaching for one of her rare cigarettes. After lighting one, she conscientiously blew out and broke the match. The field was dry, and they'd warned her. Puffing restlessly, her expression sulky, she studied the scarecrow. Odd, how its arms hung down; most scarecrows held them out horizontally. Yes, it almost seemed as if the ungrateful child preferred this straw man to her own kin. For two cents she'd leave Janie with the old folks. Would, too, only—after all, she was earning that two hundred dollars, and it wouldn't be easy to get along without it.

A flock of crows swept by, cawing harshly. Although they dipped momentarily towards the field, all but one sheered off. The single exception, big, glossy, and arrogant, dived down, alighting not five feet from the scarecrow. The leader raved at him, circling, but the rebel gave a brief derisive croak and fell to, showing a hearty appetite.

Aunt Ellen smiled maliciously. So that was the great scarecrow Grandpa bragged about. A crow pecking at the corn practically on top of the fool thing. Watching it, she found her gaze blurring, and felt distressingly conscious of the hammering heat. It wasn't wise to sit here long; the sun was too powerful. A child was packed with vitality; a girl like Janie could frolic in the soggiest weather, while her elders drooped miserably even in the shade. Not for an old spinster, such energy; she wasn't built that way. The field danced before her eyes.

Suddenly she tensed, staring incredulously. Was that a heat flicker, or had the scarecrow MOVED? There was no breeze, yet it had seemed for a second as if the thing made a single streaking motion, bending far over, and—where was that lone, insolent crow?

Absurd idea. Naturally, it was the heat plus the subtle influence of Janie's childish fancies. Determinedly, Aunt Ellen scrambled to her feet and strode down the narrow lane between the ranked stalks. No use wasting more time on the willful girl. A closer look at the scarecrow her niece preferred to real folks, and then back to the house to begin packing.

She was dripping and fretful when she arrived at her goal. No point in bothering, that was plain. Same as any other scarecrow, just as she might have known. Holding her cigarette in one lean hand, she surveyed Josephus critically. Head—a coarse flour sack stuffed with something or other; probably chaff. Badly painted face, although the ruddy eyes did have a sinister squint that added character of a sort. Plump, lopsided body of blanketing draped in a rusty old swallowtail coat; pants of stiffened canvas; and feet that wore flamboyant boots of cracked patent leather. And those outsize work gloves—why, one of them was trickling crimson, shimmering black and moist red showing between the awkwardly clenched fingers.

Fascinated, Aunt Ellen thrust the cigarette hastily back into her mouth, and wrenched at the secretive fist with both hands. Reluctantly the flaccid fingers opened; something fell out, raising a puff of dust as it struck the ground. She gaped at it, there on the sunbaked earth, and her cigarette dropped alongside in a shower of sparks. A crushed crow, beady eyes bulging insanely; feathers dabbled with blood; the whole sleek, vital mechanism mashed to a grotesque lump of carrion.

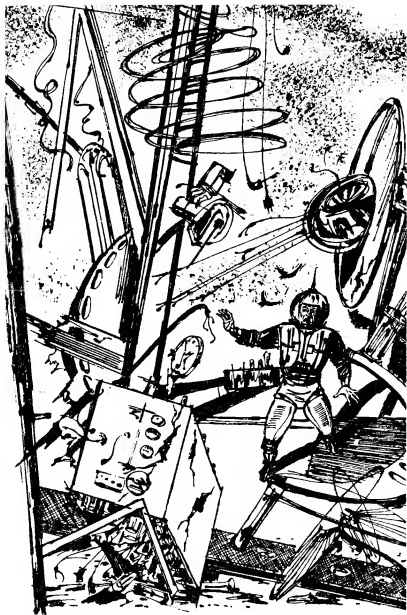
The woman gave a little gasp, and her heart hammered unbearably. For a second she swayed, but the iron in her triumphed, and she turned to go.

But it seemed to her that boneless, tenacious fingers were lapping her corded throat, paralyzing limbs and will. Aunt Ellen died very quickly, and the last thing she saw was a painted, leering face staring into her own.

She died in seconds; too soon to see the dry, tindery undergrowth whisper into flames about the scarecrow's great boots. Too soon to see fire claw up the straw-filled cloth, lick at the tightening fingers that seemed to paw the flames, crackling its grim finale with smoke wreathing a painted smile. The scarecrow writhed on its firmly rooted stick as if trying to tear free. In a few moments there was only a blackened stub surrounded by glowing ashes of a fire that had not spread.

Soon, from the western sky came an exultant cawing as Blackie led his ravenous flock down on the juicy, ripe cars.

The way was clear.



THE VANDAL

by EVELYN GOLDSTEIN

ABEL woke to find his cheeks damp with tears.

He did not move. He lay a still moment on the pneumatic cot and looked unseeing at the cave walls in the shaded glow from his A-lantern.

Although there was no sensation, Abel was aware of the minute follicles working in his T-suit. He never removed that garment. It completely encased him, like a fine extra skin, and was atomically pressurized to maintain a 70° temperature in any external weather, yet at the same time keep his internal temperature normal. Its chemical lining transmuted foreign elements into oxygen; chemical absorbents kept carbon dioxide and moisture within bounds; nutrient follicles nourished him; elimination follicles freed his body of impurities.

In seconds his face was dry. Gone the evidence of deep buried loneliness of the only human on Venus.

Ironically, in spite of all their ingrained training, he thought, they had not been able to root out basic emotion. They had nullified to a great extent, to the minimum, fear, frustration, passion—and yet primitive feelings liberated themselves on insidious, irrepressible tides while he slept. He imagined the alarm of the Earth staff, the psychiatrists, psychologists, geneticists—all the scientists, technicians, educators, and statesmen who had put their hopes on him and the pitiful few like him. Parents had been genetically selected, pre-births and post-births carefully supervised; the less than perfect infants and children ruthlessly weeded out in Operation Space Baby. It had been a daring, desperate experiment designed to spawn—*SPACEMEN*.

A wind stirred the reed drape he had plaited for his doorway. Amber daylight from a filtered sky cast shafts into the room. Color blazed around the walls. Illusion sprang to life in the gleam of eyes, lifted faces, bodies in suspended motion.

When Abel turned his head, lake water glinted silver from blue depths reflecting a mountain ascending to startling snow. In a valley azaleas burst crimson out of green. On a plain a wheat field rippled golden and the molten bodies of those who harvested it shone with sweat. Where he lay Abel might reach out a hand and touch a woman's rounded hip, put fingers on lips moist with carmine. But he did not spoil the mirage. He knew metallic paints gave lustre to the eyes, and the sunburnt flesh was icy on its canvas of stone.

He had painted Man—at labor, at play—features turned roomward to look wherever he moved, to watch whatever he did, so he might never feel alone.

On the ceiling morning was eternal. Plump clouds were warm with the certainty of sun hidden on some extended horizon. Abel warmed himself in that sun of hallucination.

He resented the eternal clouds of Venus. Sulphur and brimstone he called it, that ten mile layer of steaming gases from the lavaed lakes and fissured land. Like a cloistered virgin, Venus had veiled herself under gauze smoke of geysers and vaporous drapery of steaming marsh. Two hundred odd days ago—almost a full Venusian year ago—in the tricky fight to land, Abel had pierced her mists and her tenuous trappings. But even with the automatic controls regulating the rate of descent after gravity reasserted itself, the inviolate female had not permitted him full sight. In the rifts of the gaseous swirls he had glimpses of her boiling lakes and barren hills. An ill-favored wench that hid herself so . . .

When the reverse rockets took control he had voiced a prayer to find solidity amid the morasses. And when his telescopic landing leg dug into a volcanic plateau ringed by yellow eroded hills, and his outrigger supports locked into landing position, he came out under her murky covering to find Venus an unhealthy dame, festering with eruptions. Her highlands were of bald, corroding mineral. Plants of strange amorphism weaved through primordial bogs—with few exceptions, animal life existed only in the microscopic stage.

Of course there were the *Zing*.

In a frivolous moment he had named them *Zing*, because of their facile swiftness, their manner of hummingbird darting. *Zing* and they were gone. *Zing* and they were back.

Every wake period Abel fed them. He rose now, took the lantern from its peg and stepped out into hazy daylight.

A *Zing* flew down from a rock niche Abel had lined with dripping lichen plants. As she perched on his shoulder he said gravely, "Good morning, Titania." Though she could not communicate, usually she would peck his cheek in the caressing manner of loving budgies of Earth. But this time, when he extended the lantern for the radium charge that was delicacy to her, she refused it, twittering with unexpected agitation.

He took the creature on his finger where she gripped with two hind claws. Her short front claws were clasped in an attitude of anxiety. He looked at the pretty little thing with her iridescent white scale body like mother-of-pearl, her small hourglass figure and membranous wings that made rapid, almost invisible stir in the air. Her oval beak poured explanations he could not understand, and the membranes on her beautiful humanoid eyes set atop her crested head worked nervously.

He was dumbfounded. He had always known the *Zing* as a happy-go-lucky intelligence that traveled in families rather than swarms. Titania and Oberon, her mate, had attached themselves to him, and Abel had surmised they were newlyweds who had adopted him. Perhaps in his striving for attainment he was childlike to them, living so simple and carefree a life.

Once he had decided "You're a bunch of hedonists," after watching a beautiful flying, halting dance they had performed in exact rhythm to a song he had sung. In fact any aesthetic undertaking of his had been followed with interest and flattering imitation. Their five-fingered upper appendages had a grasping digit akin to the human thumb, and this puzzled him.

"You're smart," he had told them. "You could probably outdo us in mechanical achievement but you're not interested. You don't covet, you don't murder. You live the Golden Rule and you're happy. If only I could learn your secret," he had mused, "so I could pass it on to Earth." That would have been more vital than all the geophysical and astrophysical data on Venus he could have brought home. Home—the Earth he had left in the black grip of impending conflict, with gigantic headlines booming despair:

HYDROGEN-COBALT WAR WILL END LIFE
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION WARNS.

Maybe it was contagious, that disease of race destruction, that frenzy. Maybe he had polluted the *Zing*. He had never seen one jittery before.

"Is Oberon in trouble?" he wondered. But at that Oberon flew to his shoulder, the scales of his dark brown body also distended with distraction.

Abel's eyes narrowed. Oberon had flown to him out of the smaller cave adjacent to his sleeping quarters, the room that Abel had converted to a laboratory-museum, with ledges and rock slabs as "work-tables."

Cold premonition gripped him. He rushed to the cave and stopped short within the entrance.

The place was a shambles. His bottles were broken. His minerals, his plant specimens scattered. His films were ripped from containers and torn in shining plastic bits that winked nervously, meaninglessly in the holocaust. Abel's cherished slides were crystal slivers, shivering where the light caught them. He had placed his radio and photographic equipment on a five-foot ledge; beneath that his instrument panel, his electronics equipment.

Someone—something—had taken them down and smashed them so their dials were askew, their switches snapped, their wires hanging like broken limbs in desolate, mute appeal.

He wanted to reach down to touch tenderly each needle, each sliver, each coil. He wanted to say, as a mother says to a child, "You'll be all right. In the morning you'll be healed again." But he could not. He was not healed himself. He was sick.

He was staring at mounds. No, they were graves, little dirty broken graves of Mankind's hopes. They fused before his eyes, and became one big black wreckage, all beyond repair.

He fell to his knees. He pawed with aimless anxiety. Where to begin?

Jagged glass glanced from the fabric of his suit. In gentle despair he lifted handfuls that once had housed spores, cells, microbi. Mocking and intact the handle of a beaker. Silvery perished bits of tubes and resistors, of capsules, of silicon stoppers.

The slimes he had caught, the algae he had preserved had run from him like rivulets. They had dried and died and blown away in the breath of air. Everything burst in his reaching, ashes in the breeze, bubbles in the hand, sunflecks on the skin.

His data was powder and fell through the hourglass of vandalism. Within the week Earth and Venus would again be at perihelion—the time to blast for home . . .

No time to reassemble, to retest, to rerecord . . .

After a long time in vacuum Abel raised his head. He became aware of motion, of cool fanning wings near his cheeks, of the *Zing* perched on either shoulder rubbing their beaks consolingly against his face.

He felt his racing pulses slow. Initial horror fell away. He took a deep shuddering breath and rose tentatively to his feet. The *Zing* fluttered from his shoulders, hovering before him, wings almost invisible with rapidity.

"Who did this?" Abel asked. He was surprised that his voice was calm of the point of dispassion.

They flew to each other, locked in agitated embrace, wings beating, beating . . .

Abel stared. He had a queer taste of tight cold at his throat. The *Zing* knew the vandal—and were alarmed.

He went outside. From his plateau vantage he surveyed the terrain as far as the swirling mists permitted.

Ahead and around the fetid landscape swelled and humped in a line of fog-shrouded hills. Downslope a black canyon looked as though a giant smith had cracked it open with a smoking hammer. From the depths rumbling gases swirled. He could hear the hiss of steam from vents of fissured ground, and the burbling of hot springs frothing tortured courses underground.

He had seen nothing. In his numerous explorations in the auxiliary soarer, much like an airborne sled, he had seen no sign of life other than the *Zing* and the few creatures of toadstool size and amoeba fluidity. And Abel knew that no small-sized creature was capable of wreaking such havoc to his laboratory. The spectrometer alone, for analyzing high-altitude gases, was half the size of a man and heavy even for Abel.

He scanned the ground. But only his own prints marred the silt. Why was he thinking of footprints? Perhaps the intruder was winged?

He glanced uneasily to the churning sky.

Bitter eyes cursed the smog ceiling. Shroud! He hated it. He was sick for a sight of stars again; of sunrise and sunset; of white and blazing sun. SUN! How he would court her—fire-bejeweled courtesan. He would lie naked in her sight, allowing her fingers to stroke his skin bronze—when he got home—

If—

He turned. The *Zing* were in the cave's mouth, still fluttering, still clinging together, watching him.

"Why?" he asked them. "Why don't you show me the way?"

Always before they had been his guides and companions. Confidently he had followed them through morasses, past spouting hot rocks, through witch-brew gullies, along muddy serpent-tongued rivers forking the land into crevices. In the southland they had led him safely under the dripping canopy of lichenous plants that moldered the very rocks underfoot. Nothing had daunted his *Zing*—not caverns, nor darkness, nor black depths, nor scarred heights, nor slithering essences, nor blind-reaching growths.

They had seemed imbued with some god-like serenity, some inner faith which no danger could shake. Abel had found his strength in their composure. And now, more than the heartbreak of destruction, he was shaken by the *Zing's* discomposure.

"Which way shall I go?"

They twittered. They raised those humanoid forepaws in mute appeal. Plainly they understood Abel. They could guide him if they wanted. But they would not.

He spun away from them. If they would give him no clue he would tear the globe apart in his hands. Yesterday he would have given Mankind Venus—a wide-open planet. Today he had to find and compute the hazard potential of an Unknown Destroyer or lose for Earth an escapeway if and when they loosed disaster upon themselves.

He plunged down the north side of the incline. Igneous rock bounced protestingly before him. Something bright metallic flew under his foot, skittering 20 yards to a rest against pitted felsite.

Icy premonition told him to let it lay. He had glimpsed the shape, guessed the object. Stiff-legged he moved to it, bent and picked it up. Blank-eyed he stared at the incredible normalcy of the thing.

A wrench!

A man tool.

A man would know how to wield it, how to bring it smashing against instruments, apparatus, vials . . . *A man . . .*

Abel remembered S-Day back on Earth. Like uncaged birds, from every part of the globe, under the watchful surveillance of UN Security Committees, spacecraft of every nation cut the ties of gravity. They tore skyward, those cosmic homesteaders racing to stake solar claims. Gracefully or ponderously, for not all were of one design or construction, the specially-bred space scouts broke trail.

Abel's own hub-type ship was a one-man craft, hurtling from its cradle like a brilliant discus from a thrower's grasp. Built on the planetary rotational theory, with its own axial tilt, gravitational core and centrifugal circumference it took the distress out of free-fall and beyond-light speeds. Abel had no way of knowing how many ships had plunged back never to rise again, how many had blazed like short-lived meteors, how many had reached the Moon of Earth, the Moons of Mars, Mars itself. He only knew his was the only craft to land on Venus. His unceasing signals and messages, his exploratory flights had been unrewarded. In an almost complete Venusian year not another human voice had spoken to him, not another human face had risen to greet him.

He hefted the wrench uneasily from hand to hand, staring at the way his fingers curled one way, the thumb the other, meeting around the haft. The thumb . . .

The *Zing* had thumbs!

He was appalled. He looked back. Atop the rise they fussed, parents aggrieved for a troubled child. Their bird voices implored him back and he shook black doubts away. He could not doubt them. If they withheld help it must be because they knew a danger he could not foresee; and they could neither forestall what he might find, nor counteract its result.

Abel wished they could speak to him, wished they could tell him what fearsome awareness they wanted to save him from. "If I could change the small cave into yesterday," he muttered, "intact, data assembled. If I could believe hostility was only an Earth disease . . ."

If! The biggest little word.

Perhaps the *Zing* really were the gentle, beautiful people. But then again perhaps they were clever fiends with nefarious schemes to out-Machiavelli the Prince of Darkness.

The wrench weighed cold and heavy in his grasp. Troubled he looked at it. There was a familiar nick on the metal shaft. *His wrench!*

The last time he had seen it was in a clamp of the tool box—in his *spaceship*.

HIS SPACESHIP!

Abel began to run.

His feet slipped in crumbling soil, kicked up eaten stones, pounded over striated ground. On volcanic incline he scrabbled to the tableland where his vessel reposed.

It was gone.

Stupidly he gawked for the shining disc-shaped vessel that should have gleamed on its elevated landing legs. It was not there. In its place an ancient scar-pocked mockery lay half sunk in burnt silt and blackened, pulverized rock.

Abel fought to keep down panic. He told himself he was a creature of reason. Every riddle had an answer of logic. Every mystery had a source. If he kept his calm, if he remained clear-headed this, too, would have a solution.

He drew a deep breath. He willed his pulses to slow, his stomach to settle. He made himself look at the derelict, at the rusted hulk with holes torn through and the wind sighing in and out mournfully.

Between yesterday and today some thieving space pirate had stolen his beauty and left this beast.

Between yesterday and today?

Abel walked forward, reached down, touched the ground. It was an old burning. The ash had begun to ossify.

Fright fluttered up and again he steadied himself. Whoever—whatever—had wrecked his laboratory could also pilot a ship. But what magician was it with a warped sense of humor that could—in short spans—transform alluvium to dessication?

Abel's speculations were interrupted. The *Zing*, flustered, had followed him. With uncharacteristic timidity they hovered behind, chattering to each other with such nervous intensity that his misgivings changed to annoyance.

"Stop pretending, you flying reptiles!" he shouted. "You with your deep concern for me! Where's my ship! Where's the thing that put this—this caricature in its place?"

Their conversation stopped. They broke away from each other like abashed children. He had the ridiculous notion that they could understand every word he said, while he was deaf to them. It infuriated him.

"Tell me the truth, damn you!" Abel was on the point of rage through frustration. He felt he was a silly clockwork of coils and gears

all wound tight. A sudden release would send him all to pieces, flying in every direction.

"And then who will put me together and head me to earth?" he yelled. His own words sounded so clownish to his ears that it brought back sanity. "I'm sorry," he apologized to the *Zing*. "Maybe you do know and can't tell, and maybe you just have good reason not to tell. Actually, you've been pretty sensible about things before."

Hesitantly they came to him, perching on either shoulder. "It's not your problem anyway," he reassured, "and I'm sorry to burden you with mine. Just sit comfortable while I figure this cursed thing out."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully, studying the ghost vessel. The familiar look of it made him cold with apprehension. He had the sensation of precognition, of having been in this site before, seeing this ship before, experiencing this surge of solitary fright before. He felt trapped between two mirrors, multitudes of himself infinitely reflected, the core of a spiderweb stretching eternally.

The *Zing* made plaintive attempts to draw him from the dark brink of his own imagination. Titania flew to the ground doing the rhythmic dance that usually pleased him. It only brought the frown deeper to Abel's brow. He was certain now that they concealed the vandal not out of fear for themselves, but out of fear for him. Why? What was this danger to Man that did not touch other life? What was the Enemy?

He began to walk toward the ship.

Oberon gave a strident cry. Titania rose on lightning wings, almost touched Abel's face. Her appeal was unmistakable. He could not have understood her better had she said aloud, "Come away. This vessel holds nothing but evil for you. Come back to the cave. We will dance for you. We will sing for you. We will keep you company while you paint pictures of the life and peoples of your planet. We will help you repair your instruments, your laboratory. We will be your friends. Only come away from here."

But he could not come away. He was on Discovery's threshold and had to pluck the forbidden fruit even if it cost him Eden. If Venus were closed to Man, he had to know the why and the wherefore.

On balled feet he approached. His hands were tight fists. The wind in the shell blew eerie chills up his spine. When he came near enough to see the name it was obscured by fine volcanic dust. He rubbed off the dust and studied the dim lettering. After a while his head bobbed like that of a sick old man.

"Mine," he whispered to the churning sky. "Mine. My ship." And the cold pit of despair enclosed him.

He stood dead, lost for an endless time.

"... there will be times you will encounter obstacles beyond your experience, decisions too complex for resolving, setbacks too disheartening for bearing. You are not in a position to indulge yourself. You are not permitted the luxury of escape through alcohol, through drugs, through insanity, through suicide. We have put too much planning into your existence to allow frustrations to disrupt you. We estimated your potential before birth, and we nurtured that potential through maturity. You are as close to homo-superior as it is in our ability to breed. You can excel in anything; mathematics, science, art, music, whatever you wish, whatever you touch. You have a probable longevity of three or four times that of normal humans. You, and the few like you, are our emissaries in space. You are expendable in-expendables. You are only as superior as the crafts you control. If they fail, you fail; if you are lost Earth may be lost. If only one of you comes through, all of Mankind may come through. Once you are past Earth attraction we cannot help you. Therefore we have planted mental guideposts to enable you to surmount the insurmountable, to face the unfaceable, to take a positive stand to the unutterable, the unbearable, the unforeseeable. . . Good luck. God help you. God help us all. . .

It was the Leader who had said those words. Abel remembered him clearly; a straight-shouldered man with an intelligent, mature face but eyes that were tired for not seeing a solution to impending darkness. He had looked down the line of Spacemen and his glance had lighted with new hope. He had locked eyes with each man and each man had felt the special appeal, the special approbation. Almost—almost Abel could feel that gaze on him now.

Abel looked down at his hands. He still held the wrench. He thought of the hand swinging that wrench. "Mine," he muttered. He thought of the heel grinding his slides into glazed death's eye slivers. "Mine," he murmured. And his head with dull gaze swung beseechingly to a world that had no solace to give.

He recalled it all now—the endless dismayed years after his return to Earth from the exploration of Venus. How had he been able to mercifully forget the horror-stricken day when he had climbed from his ship to look into dense Earth atmosphere that was twin to Venus?

Smog clouds from a still smoldering globe hid the shame of Earth's ugliness. He had not believed. He had been demented. He had shot flares like bloody fire hands asking alms. His voice had grown hoarse over the mike, "Come in. Come in! Anybody! ANSWER!"

He had expended his fuel dipping under the fissioning clouds from the miles of burning. He had searched for oceans that did not exist, for continents that had changed their forms. And when the truth, the hard, bitter unchangeable truth had to be faced he had been unable to face it alone and had had to dig into the dim recesses of subconscious for the guideposts of survival. Even as he must do again now.

The *Zing* brushed his face offering love, giving comfort.

"How many times?" he whispered to them, "How many times have I collected specimens for Earth—from *Earth*? How many times have I become aware of self-deception and destroyed this futile, this stupid compilation that nobody needs because *I* am everybody left?" He began to laugh, choking on it. But his survival suit would not long allow the solace of tears.

Beat. Beat. Cool wings beat the tempo of *Zing* affection.

He stroked their scales. "I'm glad I brought you from Venus on the return trip. You'll do a better job for Earth than we did."

Heavily he turned his back on the ship. It would be a long time before he would come this way again. The vessel would peel and rust apart. The ground would become coal. Or diamonds.

If the next race cared about coal—or—diamonds . . .

He would go on thinking himself young, not looking beneath the suit to see gnarled hands and whitening hair. He would go back to his cave, his holy of holies, his shrine to Earth and to Man who would die at his death. He would lie down and sleep, and take the out that the psychiatrists, in merciful foresight, had given him—the protection of auto-hypnotic delusion. He would wake and paint in another cave and work the long Earth years, believing them one Venusian year.

He sighed. The *Zing* nestled close while he toiled his way to the mouth of his cave. He turned and looked again at the land, the boiling, brutalized land he would pretend was Venus.

For a brief moment with his artist's eye he rent the atomic smoke that hid the rusted heights. He conjured an enchanted apparition that leapt with forests, pine-trails, sparkling brooks. He held it for a savoring moment before it slipped away into the lost and gone. Then he turned his back on the lovely mirage, the dream, the bubble, the good green hills that once—were Earth's. . .

The Black Sadhu

by THEODORE MATHIESON

It was at the end of our first month in Ceylon that Esther and I met the black sadhu with his begging bowl, sitting in the shade of a Bo tree outside a Buddhist temple. We had walked along the beach from our hotel in Colombo—under a lace work of coco-palms, past a fishermen's village—while Esther argued against my wanting to spend another few weeks of our honeymoon upon the island, saying how I seemed to be more interested in ancient, deserted cities than I was in her, when she interrupted herself to point to the shrubbery beside the flag-stoned path, and I turned to look down at the bowed head of Go-bind Singh.

At first it was the strange sight of a sadhu in a *black* tunic that astonished me—Buddhists wear the saffron robe—and I had never seen the black robe before. Then it was the razor thin, mummified look of his dark features, clean-shaven, except for curious patches of curling white beard. And finally it was his eyes—a kind of smoky, reddish-brown, which as I dropped a Singhalese coin into his outstretched bowl, gave me an unmistakeable look of *recognition*. Then he nodded his shaven head as if mine were the act of an old friend, and I was moved to ask:

"Do I know you?"

"Very well, indeed," the sadhu replied, astounding me with his perfect English. "You just do not remember."

"I certainly would have remembered a—" I was about to say "holy beggar" but caught myself in time—"sadhu who spoke my own language as well as you do!"

"My name is Gobind Singh, sahib. I was once a teacher of archeology at the University of Benares," he said, "but I've given up all that."

"To what religion do you belong?" I asked.

But Gobind Singh was looking past me, as if he also recognized Esther, and with her arm through mine, I felt her bridle at his scrutiny.

"Mine is a very ancient lore, sahib," he said finally. "There are very few of us, and we do not live in hermitages or caves, but in the deserted cities of the island. I myself am from Anuradhapura."

Again his reddish-brown eyes flashed me a *knowing* look, and he pointed a lean finger to his chest.

"You have trouble, *here*?"

I turned to Esther with a look of incredulity that made her laugh. "He's on to you, all right, Harry," she said.

Well, I wasn't going to stand there in broad daylight and discuss my health problems with a man who, in spite of his familiar glance, I knew to be a stranger. The doctors at home in San Bernardino had told me that I had a bad case of hypertension from sticking too close to my father's publishing business, and that unless I did something to relax, my heart might eventually become organically damaged. So I got married and went on a round-the-world honeymoon.

But I still had the unpleasant habit of awakening in the night gulping for air, with some kind of squeeze-play going on in my chest, and my heart tripping like a hammer. And here was this mendicant with the bowl diagnosing me on sight!

"It's really nothing I care to talk about," I said aloofly, and started walking off, but the Hindu reached up and seized my white coat with dusky fingers.

"Your condition means only one thing, sahib. The *Pret* will be coming to you."

"The *Pret*?"

"Perhaps tonight. When you are asleep." He folded his hands in his lap and closed his eyes.

Esther and I passed into the temple. I pondered the sadhu's strange prediction, wondering what a *Pret* could be, and then put it out of my mind completely when I saw the Buddha, in stone, lying on his side, a half-block long, gazing at us with dispassionate sapphire eyes.

"Can't you feel the serenity, the peace in the presence of this image?" I said to Esther in an awed whisper.

"It smells damp in here," Esther said wrinkling her nose and fidgeting with her hairdo. Then she opened her purse to examine her perfect pink and blonde complexion in the mirror.

When we came out into the hot, dazzling sunlight a half hour later, the black sadhu was gone.

I thought of the *Pret* once or twice again, and mentioned it over supper, but it didn't seem to stimulate Esther's imagination the way it did mine.

I dropped off to sleep after arguing inconclusively, as usual, with Esther about whether we should stay on the island a while longer. I still wanted to climb up to Adam's Peak at 7,000 feet, and see the panorama of lagoons and lakes and paddy fields, but Esther was coolly indifferent about scenery.

I was awakened by the usual symptoms, a feeling of lack of oxygen and a weight pressing upon my chest, but when I opened my eyes, my heart almost stopped with shock and horror.

Something was sitting upon my chest, making every effort to strangle me by drawing the edge of the sheet tightly across my throat.

It was humanoid, naked and male, about the size of a two-year-old child, but its face was old and diabolical, and a greenish glow emanated from its skin, which, when I tried to pull his hands away from the sheet across my throat, felt rough and pachydermous. His eyes, set in a wrinkled, derisively grinning face shone dimly red, but brightened at my every struggle like the coals of a bellowed fire.

At my fourth or fifth attempt, I managed to pull his hands away from the counterpane, and I drew frantic draughts of air, and the Thing seemed to grow suddenly twenty or thirty pounds heavier. I felt myself pressed suffocatingly deep into the mattress.

"Esther!" I managed to cry, and a moment later the lamp on the night stand between our beds went on, and instantaneously the horror vanished—sight, weight, and all—and I lay gasping on my side.

"Poor darling," Esther said, as if I were a child. She climbed out of her bed and sat comfortably nude in the warm night upon mine, stroking my forehead with cool fingers.

"I saw the *Pret*," I panted.

"You had a dream?"

"I saw it, felt it; it was *here*!" I explained what I experienced, certain I had named the Thing correctly, and that it was no mere dream. Esther began to look frightened, and rose and put on her robe.

"It's this *place*," she complained. "It's so hot, your brain is always in a fever. And the smell alone is enough to turn your head. We ought

to leave it, Harry. I'm afraid of it!"

I tried to calm her by telling her again how I had felt when I saw Ceylon from the steamship for the first time, with the rosy dawn rising behind the island, and the tumbled, fecund foliage lying in blue, mystical shadow along her flat, coastal plain. Even now, when my heart was still beating fast over the weird visitation, I remembered the special joy I felt at the sight, and the distinct knowledge that *I was coming home*. But Esther clapped her hands impatiently over her ears.

"How could you be coming home, Harry!" she cried. "You've never been here before. You sound out of your mind when you talk like that. Let's catch the next boat, or better still let's go by plane! Our new house is waiting for us in San Bernardino! I want to go there and settle down, Harry!"

"I can't leave Ceylon now, Esther," I said. "Not at least until I've seen the sadhu again. I want to know what this *Pret* really is. He would know, he predicted its coming. Am I doomed to have the thing sit on my chest for the rest of my life?"

"All right, Harry," Esther said, looking more stubborn-lipped than I ever could have imagined her, "I'm convinced that if you leave this island you won't imagine *Prets* sitting on your chest. But I'll give you exactly two day to look up your sadhu. Whether you find him or not, I'm leaving on the plane two days from now, on Tuesday afternoon—alone, if I have to!"

"You're running the chance of breaking up our marriage before it's barely begun," I said angrily.

"That's too bad. But we're lucky to have found out that we're incompatible this early!"

And of course, that was the crux of it. I was admittedly an incurable romantic, and Esther was proving herself far more the "no nonsense" type than I cared to see her be. I knew she longed to settle down back home, go to the monthly country club dances, the Friday bridge nights, and, eventually, to meetings of the P.T.A. I had to face it. There was a dreary future ahead of me . . .

"I'll try to find him tomorrow," I said, sighing.

But when I went back to the Buddhist temple—Esther had remained at the hotel, pleading a headache—the sadhu was not there. I searched all about the premises, asked several native attendants about him.

"He wears a black tunic, not saffron," I said, and at my words, their faces looked frightened, and they turned and made obeisances towards the reclining Buddha, but refused to answer further questions.

I returned to the hotel discouraged, had a light lunch and spent the

afternoon visiting other Buddhist temples within the city, which proved as profitless as my morning search. This time Esther accompanied me, but since our quarrel we had little to say to one another.

Only one person—a dark-skinned Tamil attendant of the Temple of the Hair—took the trouble to say: "Do not look for a black sadhu, sahib. You might regret finding him."

But I had to talk to the sadhu.

Because that night the *Pret* came again. I awoke to find him squeezing my nose with all his might between his index and third finger, his luminous face a mask of sadistic glee. I tried to scream my protest, but could not utter a sound, and his weight upon my chest was crushing. He kept nodding his head, and all the while I moved my body inch by inch to the edge of the mattress. The effort brought sweat from every pore, but gradually I lay upon the extreme margin, and after one more monumental exertion I tumbled to the floor. I had hoped that a physical blow of this kind would dislodge the *Pret*, but I was wrong. I had fallen upon my back, and he still sat upon my chest, and now he began to poke his sharp fingers at my eyes. I squeezed them shut, but his devilish thrusts were excruciating; then for variation, he seized my hair and began pulling it out by the roots. At this I yelled again, and was gratified to hear my cry emerged unhindered. Esther turned the lamp on again, and the *Pret* was gone.

I felt foolish lying half under my own bed, but was spared comment as we stared at the clumps of my own fair hair that lay scattered upon the green carpet . . .

The next morning as Esther and I came out of the revolving doors of the hotel on our way to the airline ticket office—Esther had finally convinced me that I should exchange our boat tickets—the sadhu was standing upon the sidewalk, waiting for us. He appeared, in his worn black tunic, as out of place in these neat, immediate occidental surroundings, as a giant carrion bird, which indeed he resembled.

"They would not let me enter," he said, his dark eyes fastening hungrily on my own, "but I thought you might like to speak with me."

"Yes!" I cried. "There's a park across the way. Let us go there and sit down."

I felt Esther's resistance when I piloted her across the street, and when the three of us sat upon a stone bench in the shade of a coconut palm, she dug into her purse with whole-minded absorption, which was her way of making her opposition plain.

The sadhu sat quietly beside me, placing the begging bowl, shining with the oil from his hands, between us. I took the suggestion and

dropped several coins into it.

"It came, as you said," I remarked without hesitation. "The *Pret*. Will you tell me what it is, and why it should visit me?"

"The *Pret* is a material projection of your own evil conscience, sahib."

"Is it real?"

"Real enough to kill you unless you overcome it."

"And how can I do that?"

The sadhu moved the begging bowl a fraction of an inch, and I put a more substantial piece of paper money into it.

"I, Gobind Singh, will tell you. You must make amends for your evil act and remove the guilt. It is the only way."

"But what have I done that is so evil?" I said bewildered. "I have broken a lot of small ordinances in my day, I guess, but I can honestly say I am guilty of no major crime. Not big enough to earn a three-dimensional incubus sitting upon my chest!"

"It is not what you have done in *this* life, sahib, but a crime you have committed in your former birth."

"Oh, Harry—really!" Esther said in protest.

I silenced her with a gesture as Gobind Singh continued.

"I know it is difficult for the western mind to believe in reincarnation, but here in the east, we know the truth. We have all lived before—many times. In spite of themselves, western men have come to realize this subconsciously. It is a matter of mental evolution. The channels for recalling past experiences are opening within the mind, more and more men are catching glimpses of their immediate past incarnation, always, however, at the subconscious level. Unfortunately, along with the glimpse, the guilt of former evil comes through to burden their present conscience, to weigh upon their heart. This accounts for the great increase of heart failure among your people."

"You mean—the *Pret* visits them?"

"Of course. But they do not live to report it. In your case, you are upon the spot where you spent your former incarnation, and you have met me, Gobind Singh, who shared your experiences with you, and it is my presence that has so far given you hope and spared you from destruction by the *Pret*!"

"Just tell me how I can get rid of it for good."

"By reliving that portion of your former existence in which you committed the unforgivable crime, and by not recommitting it."

"I'm willing to do that, if it can be done," I said, and felt Esther stir impatiently beside me.

"It can be done, never fear," the sadhu said. "And I will show you the way."

"But what is this crime I have done in a past life?"

Gobind Singh blinked expressionlessly for several seconds.

"Murder, sahib," he said. "*You murdered your wife.*"

I awoke lying alone upon a huge black, ebony bedstead and watched the streaks of silver dawn through the open window opposite me. I knew with absolute clarity who I was—Edward Dreivold, a Norwegian tea planter who lived in the high country of Ceylon in the shadow of Mount Pidurutalagala. I was thirty-eight years old, the month was May, the year 1892, and my Portuguese wife, Jacobina, slept apart from me in an adjoining room. We had quarreled last evening over the trip I had promised her to her homeland in Argentina, I having decided against it because I could not accompany her on account of political disturbances among the Singhalese who were my workers.

My other self—the Harry Conway married to Esther Bortches, was buried away in my memory like a life history read in a book and half forgotten. I remembered now incuriously, as if it were a dream, the little bottle of brown powder given to me by Gobind Singh, a teaspoon of which I had dissolved in a glass of water and drank before lying down to sleep in my hotel. I remembered my wife Esther begging me not to take it, and how her eyes filled with tears. That was the last thing I remembered.

But now I banished the recollection, and set my feet upon the floor in present reality, and at the first sound of my stirring, curtains parted at one end of the room and Tamankadua, my Singhalese servant, an elderly man with white hair, entered and brought forth my clothes from the closet.

Holding out a pair of duck trousers Tamankadua said disapprovingly: "Mem sahib wishes you to come to her. Shall I tell mem sahib you wish to see her in your chambers?"

"No, Tamankadua," I said firmly, my heart beating faster as I thought of Jacobina. "I will go to her."

I stepped to the mirror and looked at myself. The dimly remembered figure of Harry Conway—lean, blond, blue-eyed—was no longer reflected. But I was not bothered; it seemed perfectly natural that I should see instead a rather short man, inclined to corpulence, with a red face and dark hair graying at the temples. At the moment I was more Edward Dreivold than I was Harry Conway.

"Your brother Arndt waits for you at the stables," Tamankadua said, arranging the gold comb in his long hair.

"Tell him I'll be along directly, as soon as I've seen my wife. We'll breakfast at Puttalami."

"Yes, sahib."

Jacobina lay upon her bed with the covers pulled down, clad in a sheer nightdress. Already one could feel the morning sun burning hot through the teakwood roof, and as always I felt the grip of desire as I beheld her slim white body, and the coal black hair that framed her soft-featured, erotic face. She glanced up at me languidly and crossed one shapely leg upon the other, swinging her foot gracefully in the air.

"Have you thought about it, Edvard?" she asked in the Norwegian I had taught her. "May I go home to Buenos Aires alone, if you cannot come?"

"I cannot do without you here," I said. "I would be lost."

Her face closed against me, and she rolled over upon her belly.

"Get out. I shall lock my door against you from now on."

"You locked it last night," I said reprovingly. "I came to you at midnight, but I could not get in. If you had asked me then, perhaps—"

Jacobina laughed suddenly, sharply. I did not like the sound of it.

"Jacobina," I said, sitting upon the edge of her bed and laying my hand upon her back, "if I have been gentle with you and indulgent, it is because I love you. But do not take advantage, or else you might find me capable of—"

I stopped speaking, my tongue went dry in my mouth, and the room swam before my eyes. For upon the floor beneath a chair by the bed gleamed an object I recognized at once. I picked it up and held it out accusingly towards Jacobina. It was the white star medal of the Order of St. Olaf, which the King had bestowed upon my brother Arndt and which he affected to carry negligently in his pocket.

"*This* is why your door was locked last night!" I said, and a sudden vision of the tall, Odin-faced Arndt with my Jacobina in his arms, made me tremble with white-hot rage. Jacobina stared guiltily up at me, and she drew up her legs defensively and hugged them, looking so like a foetus it should have struck pity to my heart. But it did not.

Silently, implacably my hands encircled her throat and the pressure I exerted seemed to assuage my anger until suddenly, like a break in the rehearsal of a tragic scene in which the actors step aside into their natural selves, I lost all rage, and the still-living woman in my grasp became almost a stranger as I knelt upon her bed, now more Harry Conway than Edward Dreivold.

You will be rid of the Pret by not recommitting the crime. It was Gobind Singh's voice, speaking within my mind.

I left Jacobina gasping upon her bed and returned to my room where I sat down heavily in a large ebony chair and stared before me. From the jungle which lay below the plantation I could hear the trumpeting "Tall-hoo-ee" of a bull elephant, and I felt so overwhelmingly lost, and longed so hard for my own time and my own wife, that tears rolled down my cheek. I heard with complete disinterest excited voices in the courtyard—Arndt's and Jacobina's, and listened as they mounted and rode away from the plantation, and didn't care a whit.

I slapped vigorously at the arms of the ebony chair and felt the pain splay out from my palm. There was nothing dream-like about this experience. It was like beating my fist upon the solid stone of a prison cell. The *reality* of this year, 1892, of these circumstances in which I was in the body of Edward Dreivold, held me prisoner more irrevocably than any penitentiary of my own time could!

"Gobind Singh!" I cried aloud. "I've done as you said. Come release me!"

I felt dead and buried.

But no one came.

How I ever got through that day, I'll never know. I paced the room, strode upon the terrace, and circled endlessly about the courtyard. I rode horseback through the jungle, returning in the evening to a supper served silently in the great dining room by Tamankadua who sullenly refused to answer my questions until I shouted at him to withdraw.

At nine o'clock in the evening I went to bed. I hadn't inquired about Arndt and Jacobina; they were no concern of mine. But before dropping off to sleep I said a fervent little prayer to the effect that my conscience was now clear, and would Gobind Singh, by the Grace of God, please return me to my own time.

I awoke with the *Pret* upon my chest.

We struggled silently, the creature's red eyes glowing more malevolently, more intent upon destroying me than ever, and its weight seemed to grow heavier with each moment, until I felt the blackness of unconsciousness hovering at the back of my eyes, and I knew that if I succumbed, the Thing would have successfully destroyed me. And with the thought, two things happened—I felt a sudden surge of new and formidable strength, and at the same moment the weight and form of the *Pret* vanished.

Tamankadua stood over me, holding a lighted candle, his ancient eyes looking down at me. It was the recognition in them that told me.

"You are Gobind Singh!" I gasped.

"Yes, I am surprised you did not recognize me earlier." .

"What does this mean?" I cried. "I followed your advice and held back from murder. And yet the *Pret* visits me again!"

Gobind Singh shook his head somberly and his eyes were expressionless.

"The *Pret* comes again because your conscience is not yet clear," he said. "There is still another crime you must expiate."

"You mean go back to another life?" I cried. "I will not!"

"You must. You were a French colonial living in Louisiana in 1795, and you murdered a Negro slave in a drunken rage, a violent drunken rage . . ."

A sudden feeling of certainty chilled me. I rose from the bed and stood over Gobind Singh with my hands clenched. This Gobind Singh had planned to trap me from the first! By leading me back from life to life to the very beginning of time and before—to non-existence, he gained some kind of inexplicable advantage, some evil emolument indescribable in terms of man's logic. Talk about devils was not in vain. They existed, and I, Harry Conway, had fallen under the power of one!

But before I had time to speak my thoughts, Gobind Singh answered them.

"No, you are wrong to regard me as evil, and to think I trapped you. I have offered you a way to rid yourself of your evil conscience, of the *Pret*. Unless you do as I say, you will not have the power to vanquish him."

"I do not trust you any longer, Gobind Singh," I cried, snatching a heavy silver candlestick from the night stand, and holding it as a weapon. "You say you mean me well, then prove it! Take me back to Colombo, to my own time."

The sadhu shook his head. "You must still spare the black man before your conscience will be clear."

"And after that, there'll be another crime to annul, and another and another! No, Gobind Singh, I think if I went with you again I would be under your domination forever. I shall fight you now, destroy you as you would destroy me—" I raised the candlestick.

"Take care, Harry Conway!" the black sadhu warned, raising a withered hand. "There is only one other way to avoid me. It is not by destroying me."

"What other way is that?" I demanded suspiciously.

"Either you must go with me, or else sacrifice the soul of the one you love!"

Gobind Singh raised his arms in a conjuring gesture, and behind

him in the dimness, I saw Esther standing nude, as if in a trance, with her eyes closed.

"Esther!" I cried, but Gobind Singh stood between us and prodded my chest with his bony fingers.

His touch enraged me. It was as if all the murderous fury that I had withheld from Jacobina suddenly flooded my being with double force. I raised the heavy candlestick and struck the sadhu with all my strength upon the head. The blow was real—I felt the jar of it deep in my shoulder sockets, and the blood was real for I felt it spurt, warm and liquid, upon my cheek. And the *satisfaction* I felt as I watched the sadhu sink lifeless to the floor was the realest of all . . .

I awoke with a sense of freedom and exhilaration. The darkness around me was reassuringly familiar, and I recognized gratefully the striations upon the wall cast by a red neon sign through a set of venetian blinds.

I was in the hotel in Colombo in my own time.

I lay feeling my rapid pulse quieting, wondering what day it was, what time. Then I turned and put my hand out for the lamp switch, and froze suddenly.

I could see Esther's form lying quietly in the bed opposite me. Surely I must have cried out and struggled in my nightmare. The sheets upon my bed, twisted and pulled, and my pounding heart told their story. *Then why hadn't Esther been disturbed by my exertions? Why hadn't she awakened?*

I turned on the switch, and light flooded the room. I sighed with relief. Esther was just asleep and breathing quietly. Perhaps the struggle had not made as much commotion as I imagined.

The clock on the night stand said two o'clock.

Esther murmured something indistinguishable, and I got up and went to her side.

"Esther," I said gently, shaking her shoulder. "Esther, I've gotten rid of it. I don't think it will be back any more."

She stirred a little and slipped her bare arms out of the covers. Her eyes were still closed, but her lips were tumescent and eager, and upon her face was an expression of lust and abandonment I'd never seen there before.

And then, at the moment that I remembered with a stab of horror *who* she reminded me of, she arched her body, flinging her arms about my neck and her lips came close to my ear.

"*Arndt!*" she whispered passionately, and drew me down to her. •

NIGHTQUAKE

by **PAT ROGERS**

FOR two nights, lying awake in the hot, stuffy room, Joey had heard strange sounds from behind the old bureau. The noise had made him uneasy. It sounded like a mouse gnawing, but less erratic and even more persistent. There was a dogged purposefulness about the faint splintering of wood fibre that troubled him deeply. In the middle of the night he would start to abrupt consciousness at the muffled rasping inside the thick wall. With wide-open eyes fixed on the shadowy ceiling, he would wonder and wonder what was working its way so determinedly into his room.

On the fifth night, when the grating, relentless noise seemed to be nearing a climax, the child, mute from birth, managed to wrench from his straining throat the thin, quavering cry, almost inaudible, that was his only link of communication with the world about him. He made a few attempts to stir the limbs left paralyzed by his recent attack of polio, but they would not respond, and would refuse to do so for many weary months of therapy. Nobody heard his feeble cries, and finally, exhausted, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Suddenly he snapped awake, tense and sweating profusely. Some-

thing was pattering across the floor towards him. Joey raised his head on its thin neck, peering about in the faint glow of a cloudy night sky. He saw the small, shadowy figure scamper to the nearest leg of the bed, and heard the rustle of its slow climb. Then it was standing on the sheet, staring at him with murky, bestial eyes glowing in a vague shape. Joey shrank, burying his face in the hot pillow.

There was the sound of heels on the landing outside—in a rippling flash of movement the creature scrambled to the floor, raced across the room, and vanished behind the bureau. Joey's mother, tiptoeing towards the bed, expecting to find him asleep, was shocked by the agonized expression on his pale, wet face.

"Joey!" she gasped. "What's the matter? You look so—is something wrong, dear? Are you in pain?"

She stroked his forehead, testing it for fever, as he fought to put into words—words only heard in his mind and never forced in recognizable form past his own lips—his new loathing for this room and his horror of staying in it alone.

"You shouldn't have left the hospital so soon," she murmured helplessly. "But they said you were wasting away there—so homesick—and the doctor—oh dear, what *can* I do with you, Joey? There's just nobody to nurse you, and I can't quit work."

Gravely, she took his temperature, gave him water, which he gulped eagerly, and tucked him in.

Twice she started to leave the room, but the strange expression on the child's face drew her back, and at last, with a sigh of resignation, she seated herself in the armchair, scene of many a similar vigil, and prepared to wait out the long, humid summer night. She thought unhappily of unwashed dishes, linen to be sorted, and a dozen other nagging chores. Watching her tired face, Joey finally relaxed and soon fell into a light doze.

But the following night, his mother had to work. Conscious of the boy's mood, although unaware of its cause, she had provided for a sitter; but the neighbor's flighty young daughter, more interested in a boy friend downstairs than a session in the gloomy sickroom, ignored Joey's pleading eyes and left him alone at nine. After all, she reasoned, the kid was safe enough in bed, and she'd be right at hand if anything came up.

He lay there, every muscle tense with apprehension, his ears straining for some sound near the bureau. His only hope was frequent visits on the part of the sitter. From downstairs he heard the faint noise of shrill laughter and the beat of fast music. These sounds of enjoy-

ment made him feel all the more desolate, and he sprawled there, hating the girl for her pleasures. Why did he have to go to bed so early? "John-e-e-e, don't!" the sitter squealed loudly, and there were scuffling noises.

At that moment he caught a sound that made his stomach heave. It was only the ghost of a rustle, coming from the open window rather than the wall. A small figure appeared on the sill, outlined fuzzily against the cloudy sky. Joey's heart stuttered wildly. Had it found another entrance? Then relief flooded his body. The visitor was just a kitten, jet black and scrawny. No doubt it had leaped from the back-yard fence to the shed, and so to his window.

The kitten eyed him warily for a moment, then the whiskered jaws opened to display red gums and white needle teeth. A faint, musical cry sounded. Joey watched, trying to coax the animal with his eyes, and pleading mentally for it to stay. At least it was company, amiable and attractive. Now it was licking one paw, following the feline adage: when in doubt, wash. Then its mind made up, the animal sprang to the floor.

For some moments, almost invisible in the shadows, it prowled about the bed, stopping once to lap a few drops of spilled milk. Finally, more interested in human companionship, the kitten made a single lithe jump of surprising power, landing squarely on the boy's thigh. Joey could move one forearm slightly, and his wasted fingers stroked the soft fur, feeling bones beneath the unpadded skin. A throaty purr followed immediately, growing in volume until the whole meager body seemed to throb. Gradually, Joey's tenseness lessened; even the kitten's lids began to droop as the stroking became more skillful. But abruptly the green eyes flared open and the vibrant form, so soft and almost shapeless in its relaxation, hardened into wiry alertness under Joey's hand. At the same time, he heard something stir behind the bureau. The kitten slipped with supple decisiveness from the boy's grasp, crouching at the edge of the bed, staring hard, its tail-tip lashing. The child heard that now-familiar pattering as the tunneler moved across the floor. There was an oddly suggestive rhythm in its padded steps.

Then, in a single fluid motion, the black kitten soared off the bed to alight with a soft, weighty impact. There was a flurry of action on the dusty boards; a faint, grating snarl sounded, to become a squall of agony as the struggle reached its brief but intense climax. The pattering came again, and seconds later the scratch of baffled claws as the frantic kitten tried futilely to wedge itself behind the bureau.

Lying full length, an inky pool against the lighter floor, it repeatedly thrust a limber paw into the narrow space.

Joey's eyes gleamed as he comprehended. Undoubtedly the skinny black kitten had routed the intruder. But his exultation was short lived. If only the kitten had managed to finish the job! How badly was the thing mauled? Would it be back again, or already dying? And what was it, anyhow? Never had he heard grownups mention anything remotely like the shape he had glimpsed twice now, although both times in very unsatisfactory light. He couldn't be sure of just what he'd seen. He knew about rats, having studied pictures of them as well as of other common animals; but this—he dropped that thread of thought as steps rang on the stairs outside.

Instantly the kitten, quick and alert, streaked across the floor, seemed to flow up to the sill, and was gone. The sitter came in, fumbling for the light switch. Joey cringed from the naked glare. Now that her employer was due this was the place to be. The pay didn't amount to much, but the job was easy, the house right next door, and the TV didn't have to be shared with four brothers and sisters. It was just as well the kid couldn't talk; at eight they were often surprisingly good reporters, as she had learned, to her chagrin, on other occasions.

Joey's gaze remained fixed on the open window. Was the kitten gone for good? He hoped not. Maybe his mother would let him keep it. On such matters, an eloquent glance was often sufficient. Odd, he'd never thought about a pet before. But if it didn't return, he wouldn't be able to ask, even. He turned towards the girl, watching her rifle the pages of a movie magazine. His eyes were hostile. She looked at him with distaste, wrinkled her flat nose, and yawned. Five minutes later Joey's mother arrived, and the sitter hurried out to join her boy friend, waiting discreetly around the corner.

Joey's mother was in the armchair for a brief visit, when it began to rain. First a thin drizzle, then the roar and beat of a thunderstorm. The wooden house shook as if a great beast were flailing it with enormous wet paws. She went to the window, drawing it down. Immediately the child raised his head, and a shrill whimper of protest came from his lips. She whirled in surprise. "Joey, what in the world!" He thrust his face towards the window, the cry in his throat more urgent. "You want it up? It'll rain in, dear—and it's sure to get chilly later." Then, seeing his expression, "All right, just a few inches, you funny boy." She kissed him and went out.

The rain increased in fury; the glass streamed; and in the distance,

thunder rumbled like a giant awakening in bad temper. Joey waited, wondering how this night would end. Against the raging of the storm, no plaint of his could possibly be heard downstairs. Even if he used the emergency device of nudging the water pitcher off its stand with his nose, the clatter would pass unnoticed. Besides, his mother couldn't stay here indefinitely. She would be back, of course, but only after a bath, some food, and numerous last minute tasks. In his helpless state Joey wouldn't occupy the intruder long. And those cruel, gloating eyes left no doubt as to its intentions.

He lay there, staring at those all important three inches at the bottom of the window. A long peal of thunder shook the house, and as it muttered away, there came a short lull in the drumming of the rain, as if the storm had paused for breath. Then he heard it, the scratchy movement near the bureau. There was just a hint of dragginess in the thing's progress across the floor, but it came with a grim relentlessness the child could sense immediately.

The child cast a final glance of despair at the window. With a swoop and a howl, the rain fell in renewed fury. He didn't hear the thing scramble up upon the bed, but he felt the faint vibrations. It paused at the foot, and after one quick look, Joey turned his face to the pillow. There was nothing he could do, and he preferred not to see too clearly. He didn't know that the drenched, bedraggled form had appeared again on the sill, nor was he aware of a visual clash as ruddy, feral eyes met the luminescent green pupils of the crouching kitten. But he felt the intruder's hasty retreat, and lifting his head, saw it overtaken by a lightning charge.

Above the black kitten's snarls he heard a wailing cry of agony; then, as before, the thing tore loose, and with a staggering run, made for the bureau, only to be brought down for the last time as the kitten made a magnificent leap with every claw bared. Sharp talons drove home, and turning on its back, the kitten brought disembowelling hind paws into savage play. A final bubbling scream, strangely suggestive of a human being at a distance, then crunching sounds. There followed a thin purr, and the noise of feeding. Joey tried hard to pierce the gloom, but the corner was dark and his neck tired.

He stretched out, feeling a magic relief sweeten every nerve. The storm was dying down, and there was only the musical splash of the drainpipe. Fragrant, cool air refreshed the room.

And then the kitten was on the bed again. It stalked from Joey's feet to his shoulder, tail high and waving. He saw the bloody gash

along one cheek, perilously near an eye. More intriguing by far was the thing in its jaws, which it dropped now, as if in tribute, on the boy's chest. The moon, emerging from behind a cloud, bathed it in revealing silver light. It was a tiny arm, bare, wire-muscled, and covered with silky red hairs. The little fist was clenched vise-like.

The child was peering at the arm, noting the bloody tangle of nerve and sinew at the mangled shoulder end, when the kitten snatched it and sprang to the sill.

As his mother came in and glimpsed the small black form, she uttered a faint scream. The kitten disappeared, and the woman, her mouth pursed in distaste, hastily slammed the window shut.

"Ooh!" she exclaimed. "Did you see that, Joey? A nasty little cat almost got in here. It might have climbed on your chest and—how I hate the sneaky things! But don't be afraid—I'll have the window screened tomorrow."



A FEAR CLASSIC:

THE DREAM WOMAN

by WILKIE COLLINS

I HAD not been settled much more than six weeks in my country practice, when I was sent for to a neighbouring town, to consult with the resident medical man there, on a case of very dangerous illness.

My horse had come down with me, at the end of a long ride the night before, and had hurt himself, luckily much more than he had hurt his master. Being deprived of the animal's services, I started for my destination by the coach (there were no railways at that time); and I hoped to get back again, towards the afternoon, in the same way.

After the consultation was over I went to the principal inn of the town to wait for the coach. When it came up, it was full inside and out. There was no resource left me but to get home as cheaply as I could, by hiring a gig. The price asked for this accommodation struck me as being so extortionate, that I determined to look out for an inn of inferior pretensions,

and to try if I could not make a better bargain with a less prosperous establishment.

I soon found a likely-looking house, dingy and quiet, with an old-fashioned sign, that had evidently not been repainted for many years past. The landlord, in this case, was not above making a small profit; and as soon as we came to terms, he rang the yard bell to order the gig.

"Has Robert not come back from that errand?" asked the landlord, appealing to the waiter, who answered the bell.

"No, sir, he hasn't."

"Well, then, you must wake up Isaac."

"Wake up *Isaac*?" I repeated: "sounds rather odd. Do your ostlers go to bed in the day-time?"

"This one does," said the landlord, smiling to himself in rather a strange way.

"And dreams, too," added the waiter.

"Never you mind about that," retorted his master; "you go and rouse Isaac up. The gentleman's waiting for his gig."

The landlord's manner and the waiter's manner expressed a great deal more than either of them said. I began to suspect that I might be on the trace of something professionally interesting to me, as a medical man; and I thought I should like to look at the ostler, before the waiter awakened him.

"Stop a minute," I interposed; "I have rather a fancy for seeing this man before you wake him up. I am a doctor; and if this queer sleeping and dreaming of his comes from anything wrong in his brain, I may be able to tell you what to do with him."

"I rather think you will find his complaint past all doctoring, sir," said the landlord. "But if you would like to see him, you're welcome, I'm sure."

He led the way across a yard and down a passage to the stables; opened one of the doors; and waiting outside himself, told me to look in.

I found myself in a two-stall stable. In one of the stalls a horse was munching his corn. In the other, an old man was lying asleep on the litter.

I stooped and looked at him attentively. It was a withered, woe-begone face. The eyebrows were painfully contracted; the mouth was set fast, and drawn down at the corners. The hollow, wrinkled cheeks, and the scanty, grizzled hair, told their own tale of past sorrow or suffering. He was drawing his breath convulsively when I first looked at him; and in a moment more he began to talk in his sleep.

"Wake up!" I heard him say in a quick whisper, through his clenched teeth. "Wake up, there! Murder!"

He moved one lean arm slowly till it rested over his throat, shuddered a little, and turned on the straw. Then the arm left his throat, the hand stretched itself out, and clutched at the side towards which he had turned, as if he fancied himself to be grasping at the edge of something. I saw his lips move, and bent lower over him. He was still talking in his sleep.

"Light grey eyes," he murmured, "and a droop in the left eyelid—flaxen hair, with a gold-yellow streak in it—all right, mother—fair white arms, with a down on them—little lady's hand, with a reddish look under the fingernails. The knife—always the cursed knife—first on one side, then on the other. Aha! you she-devil, where's the knife?"

At the last word his voice rose, and he grew restless on a sudden. I saw him shudder on the straw; his withered face became distorted, and he threw up both his hands with a quick, hysterical gasp. They struck against the bottom of the manger under which he lay, and the blow awakened him. I had just time to slip through the door, and close it, before his eyes were fairly open, and his senses his own again.

"Do you know anything about that man's past life?" I said to the landlord.

"Yes, sir. I know pretty well all about it," was the answer, "and an uncommon queer story it is. Most people don't believe it. It's true, though, for all that. Why, just look at him," continued the landlord, opening the stable door again. "Poor devil! He's so worn out with his restless nights that he's dropped back into his sleep already."

"Don't wake him," I said. "I'm in no hurry for the gig. Wait till the other man comes back from his errand. And, in the meantime, suppose I have some lunch, and a bottle of sherry; and suppose you come and help me to get through it."

The heart of mine host, as I had anticipated, warmed to me over his own wine. He soon became communicative on the subject of the man asleep in the stable; and by little and little, I drew the whole story out of him. Extravagant and incredible as the events must appear to everybody, they are related here just as I heard them, and just as they happened.

Some years ago there lived in the suburbs of a large seaport town, on the west coast of England, a man in humble circumstances, by name Isaac Scatchard. His means of subsistence were derived from any employment he could get as an ostler, and occasionally, when times went

well with him, from temporary engagements in service as stable-helper in private houses. Though a faithful, steady, and honest man, he got on badly in his calling. His ill-luck was proverbial among his neighbours. He was always missing good opportunities by no fault of his own; and always living longest in service with amiable people who were not punctual payers of wages. "Unlucky Isaac" was his nickname in his own neighbourhood—and no-one could say that he did not richly deserve it.

With far more than one man's fair share of adversity to endure, Isaac had but one consolation to support him—and that was of the dreariest and most negative kind. He had no wife and children to increase his anxieties and add to the bitterness of his various failures in life. It might have been from mere insensibility, or it might have been from generous unwillingness to involve another in his own unlucky destiny—but the fact undoubtedly was, that he had arrived at the middle term of life without marrying; and, what is much more remarkable, without once exposing himself from eighteen to eight-and-thirty, to the genial imputation of ever having had a sweetheart.

When he was out of service, he lived alone with his widowed mother. Mrs. Scatchard was a woman above the average in her lowly station, as to capacity and manners. She had seen better days, as the phrase is; but she never referred to them in the presence of curious visitors; and, though perfectly polite to everyone who approached her, never cultivated any intimacies among her neighbours. She contrived to provide, hardly enough for her simple wants, by doing rough work for the tailors; and always managed to keep a decent home for her son to return to, whenever his ill-luck drove him out helpless into the world.

One bleak Autumn, when Isaac was getting fast towards forty, and when he was, as usual, out of place through no fault of his own, he set forth from his mother's cottage on a long walk inland to a gentleman's seat, where he had heard that a stable-helper was required.

It wanted then but two days of his birthday; and Mrs. Scatchard, with her usual fondness, made him promise before he started, that he would be back in time to keep that anniversary with her in as festive a way as their poor means would allow. It was easy for him to comply with her request, even supposing he slept a night each way on the road.

He was to start from home on Monday morning; and whether he got the new place or not, he was to be back for his birthday dinner on Wednesday at two o'clock.

Arriving at his destination too late on the Monday night to make application for the stable-helper's place, he slept at the village inn, and, in good time on the Tuesday morning, presented himself at the gentle-

man's house to fill the vacant situation. Here, again, his ill-luck pursued him as inexorably as ever. The excellent written testimonials to his character which he was able to produce, availed him nothing; his long walk had been taken in vain—only the day before, the stable-helper's place had been given to another man.

Isaac accepted this new disappointment resignedly, and as a matter of course. Naturally slow in capacity, he had the bluntness of sensibility and phlegmatic patience of disposition which frequently distinguish men with sluggishly-working mental powers. He thanked the gentleman's steward with his usual quiet civility, for granting him an interview, and took his departure with no appearance of unusual depression in his face or manner.

Before starting on his homeward walk, he made some inquiries at the inn, and ascertained that he might save a few miles, on his return, by following a new road. Furnished with full instructions, several times repeated, as to the various turnings he was to take, he set forth on his homeward journey, and walked on all day with only one stoppage for bread and cheese. Just as it was getting towards dark, the rain came on and the wind began to rise; and he found himself, to make matters worse, in a part of the country with which he was entirely unacquainted, though he knew himself to be some fifteen miles from home. The first house he found to inquire at was a lonely roadside inn, standing on the outskirts of a thick wood. Solitary as the place looked, it was welcome to a lost man who was also hungry, thirsty, footsore, and wet. The landlord was civil and respectable-looking; and the price he asked for a bed was reasonable enough. Isaac, therefore, decided on stopping comfortably at the inn for that night.

He was constitutionally a temperate man. His supper simply consisted of two rashers of bacon, a slice of homemade bread, and a pint of ale. He did not go to bed immediately after this moderate meal, but sat up with the landlord, talking about his bad prospects and his long run of ill-luck, and diverging from these topics to the subjects of horse-flesh and racing. Nothing was said, either by himself, his host, or the few labourers who strayed into the tap room, which could, in the slightest degree, excite the very small and very dull imaginative faculty which Isaac Scatchard possessed.

At a little after eleven the house was closed. Isaac went round with the landlord, and held the candle while the doors and lower windows were being secured. He noticed, with surprise, the strength of the bolts, bars, and iron-sheathed shutters.

"You see, we are rather lonely here," said the landlord. "We never

have had any attempts made to break in yet, but it's always as well to be on the safe side. When nobody is sleeping here I am the only man in the house. My wife and daughter are timid, and the servant-girl takes after her missuses. Another glass of ale before you turn in?—No!—Well, how such a sober man as you comes to be out of a place is more than I can make out, for one. . . . Here's where you're to sleep. You're the only lodger to-night, and I think you'll say my missus has done her best to make you comfortable. You're quite sure you won't have another glass of ale?—Very well. Good night."

It was half-past eleven by the clock in the passage as they went upstairs to the bedroom, the window of which looked on to the wood at the back of the house.

Isaac locked the door, set his candle on the chest of drawers, and wearily got ready for bed. The bleak autumn wind was still blowing, and the solemn, surging moan of it in the wood was dreary and awful to hear through the night-silence. Isaac felt strangely wakeful. He resolved, as he lay down in bed, to keep the candle alight until he began to grow sleepy; for there was something unendurably depressing in the bare idea of lying awake in the darkness, listening to the dismal, ceaseless moan of the wind in the wood.

Sleep stole on him before he was aware of it. His eyes closed, and he fell off insensibly to rest, without having so much as thought of extinguishing the candle.

The first sensation of which he was conscious, after sinking into slumber, was a strange shivering that ran through him suddenly from head to foot, and a dreadful sinking pain at the heart, such as he had never felt before. The shivering only disturbed his slumbers—the pain woke him instantly. In one moment he passed from a state of sleep to a state of wakefulness—his eyes wide open—his mental perceptions cleared on a sudden as if by a miracle.

The candle had burnt down nearly to the last morsel of tallow, but the top of the unsnuffed wick had just fallen off, and the light in the little room was, for the moment, fair and full.

Between the foot of his bed and the closed door, there stood a woman with a knife in her hand, looking at him.

He was stricken speechless with terror, but he did not lose the preternatural clearness of his faculties; and he never took his eyes off the woman. She said not a word as they stared each other in face; but she began to move slowly towards the left hand side of the bed.

His eyes followed her. She was a fair, fine woman, with yellowish flaxen hair, and light grey eyes, with a droop in the left eyelid. He no-

ticed these things, and fixed them on his mind, before she was round at the side of the bed. Speechless, with no expression in her face, with no noise following her footfall, she came closer and closer—stopped—and slowly raised the knife. He laid his right arm over his throat to save it: but, as he saw the knife coming down, threw his hand across the bed to the right side, and jerked his body over that way, just as the knife descended on the mattress within an inch of his shoulder.

His eyes fixed on her arm and hand, as she slowly drew her knife out of the bed. A white, well-shaped arm, with a pretty down lying lightly over the fair skin. A delicate, lady's hand, with the crowning beauty of a pink flush under and round the finger-nails.

She drew the knife out, and passed back again slowly to the foot of the bed; stopped there for a moment looking at him; then came on—still speechless, still with no expression on the beautiful face, still with no sound following the stealthy footfalls—came on to the right side of the bed where he now lay.

As she approached, she raised the knife again, and he drew himself away to the left side. She struck, as before, right into the mattress, with a deliberate, perpendicularly downward action of the arm. This time his eyes wandered from her to the knife. It was like the large clasp-knives which he had often seen labouring men use to cut their bread and bacon with. Her delicate little fingers did not conceal more than two-thirds of the handle; he noticed that it was made of buckhorn, clean and shining as the blade was, and looking like new.

For the second time she drew the knife out, concealed it in the wide sleeve of her gown, then stopped by the bedside, watching him. For an instant he saw her standing in that position—then the wick of the spent candle fell over into the socket. The flame diminished to a little blue point, and the room grew dark.

A moment, or less if possible, passed so—and then the wick flamed up, smokily, for the last time. His eyes were still looking eagerly over the right-hand side of the bed when the final flash of light came, but they discerned nothing. The fair woman with the knife was gone.

Outside, the night winds keened. Unearthly beings which were clouds cast their shadows across the luminous border of the wood. Isaac shuddered as a chill blast whistled past his head, then disappeared as quickly as it had come. There were no icy blasts, there were no unearthly shapes. There was only the spectre of the fair woman with the delicate little fingers, yellowish flaxen hair, and a droop in the left eyelid.

The conviction that he was alone again, weakened the hold of the terror that had struck him dumb up to this time. The preternatural sharp-

ness which the very intensity of his panic had mysteriously imparted to his faculties, left them suddenly. His brain grew confused—his heart beat wildly—his ears opened, for the first time since the appearance of the woman, to a sense of the woeful, ceaseless moaning of the wind among the trees. With the dreadful conviction of the reality of what he had seen still strong within him, he leapt out of bed, and screaming—"Murder!—Wake up there, wake up!"—dashed headlong through the darkness to the door.

It was fast locked, exactly as he had left it on going to bed.

His cries, on starting up, had alarmed the house. He heard the terrified, confused exclamations of women; he saw the master of the house approaching along the passage, with his burning rush-candle in one hand and his gun in the other.

"What is it?" asked the landlord, breathlessly.

Isaac could only answer in a whisper. "A woman, with a knife in her hand," he gasped out. "In my room—a fair, yellow-haired woman: she jabbed at me with the knife, twice over."

The landlord's pale cheek grew paler. He looked at Isaac eagerly by the flickering light of his candle; and his face began to get red again—his voice altered, too, as well as his complexion.

"She seems to have missed you twice," he said.

"I dodged the knife as it came down," Isaac went on, in the same scared whisper. "It struck the bed each time."

The landlord took his candle into the bedroom immediately. In less than a minute he came out again into the passage in a violent passion.

"The devil fly away with you and your woman with the knife! There isn't a mark in the bed-clothes anywhere. What do you mean by coming into a man's place and frightening his family out of their wits by a dream?"

"I'll leave your house," said Isaac, faintly. "Better out on the road, in rain and dark, on my way home, than back again in that room, after what I've seen in it. Lend me a light to get my clothes by, and tell me what I'm to pay."

"Pay!" cried the landlord, leading the way with his light sulkily into the bedroom. "You'll find your score on the slate when you go downstairs. I wouldn't have taken you in for all the money you've got about you, if I'd known your dreaming, screeching ways beforehand. Look at the bed. Where's the cut of a knife in it? Look at the window—is the lock bursted? Look at the door (which I heard you fasten yourself) is it broke in? A murdering woman with a knife in my house! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Isaac answered not a word. He huddled on his clothes; and then they went downstairs together.

"Nigh on twenty minutes past two!" said the landlord, as they passed the clock. "A nice time in the morning to frighten honest people out of their wits!"

Isaac paid his bill, and the landlord let him out at the front door, asking, with a grin of contempt, as he undid the strong fastenings, whether "the murdering woman got in that way?"

They parted without a word on either side. The rain had ceased; but the night was dark, and the wind bleaker than ever. Little did the darkness, or the cold, or the uncertainty about the way home matter to Isaac. If he had been turned out into a wilderness in a thunderstorm, it would have been a relief, after what he had suffered in the bedroom of the inn.

What was the fair woman with the knife? The creature of a dream, or that other creature from the unknown world, called among men by the name of ghost? He could make nothing of the mystery—had made nothing of it, even when it was midday on Wednesday, and when he stood, at last, after many times missing his road, once more on the doorstep of home.

His mother came out eagerly to receive him. His face told her in a moment that something was wrong.

"I've lost the place; but that's my luck. I dreamed an ill dream last night, mother—or, maybe, I saw a ghost. Take it either way, it scared me out of my senses, and I'm not my own man again yet."

"Isaac! your face frightens me. Come in to the fire. Come in, and tell mother all about it."

He was as anxious to tell as she was to hear; for it had been his hope, all the way home, that his mother, with her quicker capacity and superior knowledge, might be able to throw some light on the mystery which he could not clear up for himself. His memory of the dream was still mechanically vivid, though his innermost thoughts were entirely confused by it.

His mother's face grew paler and paler as he went on. She never interrupted him by so much as a single word; but when he had done, she moved her chair close to his, put her arm round his neck, and said to him:

"Isaac, you dreamed your ill dream on this Wednesday morning. What time was it when you saw the fair woman with the knife in her hand?"

Isaac reflected on what the landlord had said when they had passed by the clock on his leaving the inn—allowed as nearly as he could for

the time that must have elapsed between the unlocking of his bedroom door and the paying of his bill just before going away, and answered:

"Somewhere about two o'clock in the morning."

His mother suddenly quitted her hold of his neck, and struck her hands together with a gesture of despair.

"This Wednesday is your birthday, Isaac; and two o'clock in the morning is the time when you were born!"

Isaac's capacities were not quick enough to catch the infection of his mother's superstitious dread. He was amazed, and a little startled also. when she suddenly rose from her chair, opened her old writing-desk, took pen, ink and paper, and then said to him:

"Your memory is but a poor one, Isaac, and now I'm an old woman, mine's not much better. I want all about this dream of yours to be as well known to both of us, years hence, as it is now. Tell me over again all you told me a minute ago, when you spoke of what the woman with the knife looked like."

Isaac obeyed, and marvelled much as he saw his mother carefully set down on paper the very words that he was saying.

"Light grey eyes," she wrote as they came to the descriptive part, "with a droop in the left eyelid. Flaxen hair, with a gold-yellow streak in it. White arms, with a down upon them. Little lady's hand, with a reddish look about the finger-nails. Clasp-knife with a buckhorn handle, that seemed as good as new." To these particulars, Mrs. Scatchard added the year, month, day of the week, and time in the morning, when the woman of the dream appeared to her son. She then locked up the paper carefully in her writing-desk.

Neither on that day, nor on any day after, could her son induce her to return to the matter of the dream. She obstinately kept her thoughts about it to herself, and even refused to refer again to the paper in her writing-desk. Ere long, Isaac grew weary of attempting to make her break her resolute silence; and time, which sooner or later wears out all things, gradually wore out the impression produced on him by the dream. He began by thinking of it carelessly, and he ended by not thinking of it at all.

This result was the more easily brought about by the advent of some important changes for the better in his prospects, which commenced not long after his terrible night's experience at the inn. He reaped at last the reward of his long and patient suffering under adversity, by getting an excellent place, keeping it for seven years, and leaving it, on the death of his master, not only with an excellent character, but also with a comfortable annuity bequeathed to him as a reward for saving his mis-

tress's life in a carriage accident. Thus it happened that Isaac Scatchard returned to his old mother, seven years after the time of the dream at the inn, with an annual sum of money at his disposal, sufficient to keep them both in ease and independence for the rest of their lives.

The mother, whose health had been bad of late years, profited so much by the care bestowed on her and by freedom from money anxieties, that when Isaac's birthday came round she was able to sit up comfortably at table and dine with him.

On that day, as the evening drew on, Mrs. Scatchard discovered that a bottle of tonic medicine—which she was accustomed to take, and in which she had fancied that a dose or more was still left—happened to be empty. Isaac immediately volunteered to go to the chemist's, and get it filled again. It was as rainy and bleak an autumn night as on the memorable past occasion when he lost his way and slept at the roadside inn.

On going into the chemist's shop, he was passed hurriedly by a poorly-dressed woman coming out of it. The glimpse he had of her face struck him, and he looked back after her as she descended the door-steps.

"You're noticing that woman?" said the chemist's apprentice behind the counter. "It's my opinion there's something wrong with her. She's been asking for laudanum to put to a bad tooth. Master's out for half an hour; and I told her I wasn't allowed to sell poison to strangers in his absence. She laughed in a queer way, and said she would come back in half an hour. If she expects master to serve her, I think she'll be disappointed. It's a case of suicide, sir, if ever there was one yet."

These words added immeasurably to the sudden interest in the woman which Isaac had felt at the first sight of her face. After he had got the medicine bottle filled, he looked about anxiously for her, as soon as he was out in the street. She was walking slowly up and down on the opposite side of the road. With his heart, very much to his own surprise, beating fast, Isaac crossed over and spoke to her.

He asked if she was in any distress. She pointed to her torn shawl, her scanty dress, her crushed, dirty bonnet—then moved under a lamp so as to let the light fall on her stern, pale, but still most beautiful face.

"I look like a comfortable, happy woman—don't I?" she said, with a bitter laugh.

She spoke with a purity of intonation which Isaac had never heard before from other than ladies' lips. Her slightest actions seemed to have the easy, negligent grace of a thorough-bred woman. Her skin, for all its poverty-stricken paleness, was as delicate as if her life had been passed in the enjoyment of every social comfort that wealth can pur-

chase. Even her small, finely-shaped hands, gloveless as they were, had not lost their whiteness.

Little by little, in answer to his questions, the sad story of the woman came out. There is no need to relate it here; it is told over and over again in police reports and paragraphs luridly descriptive of Attempted Suicides.

"My name is Rebecca Murdoch," said the woman, as she ended. "I have ninepence left, and I thought of spending it at the chemist's over the way in securing a passage to the other world. Whatever it is, it can't be worse to me than this—so why should I stop here?"

Besides the natural compassion and sadness moved in his heart by what he heard, Isaac felt within him some mysterious influence at work all the time the woman was speaking, which utterly confused his ideas and almost deprived him of his powers of speech. All that he could say in answer to her last reckless words was, that he would prevent her from attempting her own life, if he followed her about all night to do it. His rough, trembling earnestness seemed to impress her.

"I won't occasion you that trouble," she answered, when he repeated his threat. "You have given me a fancy for living by speaking kindly to me. No need for the mockery of protestations and promises. You may believe me without them. Come to Fuller's Meadow to-morrow at twelve, and you will find me alive, to answer for myself. No!—no money. My ninepence will do to get me as good a night's lodgings as I want."

She nodded and left him. He made no attempt to follow—he felt no suspicion that she was deceiving him.

"It's strange, but I can't help believing her," he said to himself, and walked away bewildered towards home.

On entering the house, his mind was still so completely absorbed by its new subject of interest, that he took no notice of what his mother was doing when he came in with the bottle of medicine. She had opened her old writing-desk in his absence, and was now reading a paper attentively that lay inside it. On every birthday of Isaac's since she had written down the particulars of his dream from his own lips, she had been accustomed to read that same paper, and ponder over it in private.

The next day he went to Fuller's Meadow.

He had done only right in believing her so implicitly—she was there, punctual to a minute, to answer for herself. The last-left faint defences in Isaac's heart, against the fascination which a word or look from her began inscrutably to exercise over him, sank down and vanished before her for ever on that memorable morning.

When a man, previously insensible to the influence of women, forms

an attachment in middle life, the instances are rare indeed, let the warning circumstances be what they may, in which he is found capable of freeing himself from the tyranny of the new ruling passion. The charm of being spoken to familiarly, fondly, and gratefully by a woman whose language and manners still retained enough of their early refinement to hint at the high social station that she had lost, would have been a dangerous luxury to a man of Isaac's rank at the age of twenty. But it was far more than that—it was certain ruin to him—now that his heart was opening unworthily to a new influence at that middle time of life when strong feelings of all kinds, once implanted, strike root most stubbornly in a man's moral nature. A few more stolen interviews after that first morning in Fuller's Meadow completed his infatuation. In less than a month from the time when he first met her, Isaac Scatchard had consented to give Rebecca Murdoch a new interest in existence, and a chance of recovering the character she had lost, by promising to make her his wife.

She had taken possession not of his passions only, but of his faculties as well. All the mind he had he put into her keeping. She directed him on every point, even instructing him how to break the news of his approaching marriage in the safest manner to his mother.

"If you tell her how you met me, and who I am at first," said the cunning woman, "she will move heaven and earth to prevent our marriage. Say I am the sister of one of your fellow-servants—ask her to see me before you go into any more particulars—and leave it to me to do the rest. I mean to make her love me next best to you, Isaac, before she knows anything of who I really am."

The motive of the deceit was sufficient to sanctify it to Isaac. The stratagem proposed relieved him of his one great anxiety, and quieted his uneasy conscience on the subject of his mother. Still, there was something wanting to perfect his happiness, something that he could not realize, something mysteriously untraceable, and yet something that perpetually made itself felt—not when he was absent from Rebecca Murdoch, but, strange to say, when he was actually in her presence! She was kindness itself with him; she never made him feel his inferior capacities and inferior manners—she showed the sweetest anxiety to please him in the smallest trifles; but, in spite of all these attractions, he never could feel quite at his ease with her. At their first meeting, there had mingled with his admiration, when he looked in her face, a faint, involuntary feeling of doubt whether that face was entirely strange to him. No after-familiarity had the slightest effect on this inexplicable, wearisome uncertainty.

Concealing the truth, as he had been directed, he announced his marriage engagement precipitately and confusedly to his mother, on the day when he contracted it. Poor Mrs. Scatchard showed her perfect confidence in her son by flinging her arms round his neck, and giving him joy of having found at last, in the sister of one of his fellow-servants, a woman to comfort and care for him after his mother was gone. She was all eagerness to see the woman of her son's choice, and the next day was fixed for the introduction.

It was a bright, sunny morning, and the little cottage parlour was full of light, as Mrs. Scatchard, happy and expectant, dressed for the occasion in her Sunday gown, sat waiting for her son and her future daughter-in-law.

Punctual to the appointed time, Isaac hurriedly and nervously led his promised wife into the room. His mother rose to receive her—advanced a few steps, smiling—looked Rebecca full in the eyes—and suddenly stopped. Her face, which had been flushed the moment before, turned white in an instant—her eyes lost their expression of softness and kindness, and assumed a blank look of terror—her out-stretched hands fell to her sides, and she staggered back a few steps with a low cry to her son.

"Isaac!" she whispered, clutching him fast by the arm, when he asked, alarmedly, if she was taken ill. "Isaac! does that woman's face remind you of nothing?"

Before he could answer, before he could look round to where Rebecca stood, astonished and angered by her reception, at the lower end of the room, his mother pointed impatiently to her writing-desk and gave him the key.

"Open it," she said, in a quick, breathless whisper.

"What does this mean? Why am I treated as if I had no business here? Does your mother want to insult me?" asked Rebecca, angrily.

"Open it, and give me the paper in the left-hand drawer. Quick! quick! for heaven's sake!" said Mrs. Scatchard, shrinking further back in her terror.

Isaac gave her the paper. She looked it over eagerly for a moment—then followed Rebecca, who was now turning away haughtily to leave the room, and caught her by the shoulder—abruptly raised the long, loose sleeve of her gown—and glanced at her hand and arm. Something like fear began to steal over the angry expression of Rebecca's face, as she shook herself free from the old woman's grasp. "Mad!" she said to herself, "and Isaac never told me." With those few words she left the room.

Isaac was hastening after her, when his mother turned and stopped his further progress. It wrung his heart to see the misery and terror in her face as she looked at him.

"Light grey eyes," she said, in low, mournful, awestruck tones, pointing towards the open door. "A droop in the left eyelid; flaxen hair, with a gold-yellow streak in it; white arms with a down on them; little, lady's hand, with a reddish look under the finger-nails. *The Dream Woman!* Isaac, the Dream Woman!"

That faint cleaving doubt which he had never been able to shake off in Rebecca Murdoch's presence, was fatally set at rest for ever. He *had* seen her face, then, before—seven years before, on his birthday, in the bedroom of the lonely inn.

"Be warned! Oh, my son, be warned! Isaac! Isaac! let her go, and do you stop with me!"

Something darkened the parlour window as those words were said. A sudden chill ran through him, and he glanced sidelong at the shadow. Rebecca Murdoch had come back. She was peering in curiously at them over the low window blind.

"I have promised to marry, mother," he said, "and marry I must."

The tears came into his eyes as he spoke, and dimmed his sight; but he could just discern the fatal face outside, moving away again from the window.

His mother's head sank lower.

"Are you faint?" he whispered.

"Broken-hearted, Isaac."

He stooped down and kissed her. The shadow, as he did so, returned to the window; and the fatal face peered in curiously once more.

Three weeks after that day Isaac and Rebecca were man and wife. All that was hopelessly dogged and stubborn in the man's moral nature seemed to have closed round his fatal passion, and to have fixed it unassailably in his heart.

After that first interview in the cottage parlour, no consideration could induce Mrs. Scatchard to see her son's wife again, or even to talk of her when Isaac tried hard to plead her cause after their marriage.

This course of conduct was not in any degree occasioned by a discovery of the degradation in which Rebecca had lived. There was no question of that between mother and son. There was no question of anything but the fearfully exact resemblance between the living, breathing woman, and the spectre-woman of Isaac's dream.

Rebecca, on her side, neither felt nor expressed the slightest sorrow

at the estrangement between herself and her mother-in-law. Isaac, for the sake of peace, had never contradicted her first idea that age and long illness had affected Mrs. Scatchard's mind. He even allowed his wife to upbraid him for not having confessed this to her at the time of their marriage engagement, rather than risk anything by hinting at the truth. The sacrifice of his integrity before his one all-mastering delusion, seemed but a small thing, and cost his conscience but little, after the sacrifices he had already made.

The time of waking from his delusion—the cruel and the rueful time—was not far off. After some quiet months of married life, as the summer was ending, and the year was getting on towards the month of his birthday, Isaac found his wife altering towards him. She grew sullen and contemptuous; she formed acquaintances of the most dangerous kind, in defiance of his objections, his entreaties, and his commands; and, worst of all, she learnt, ere long, after every fresh difference with her husband, to seek the deadly self-oblivion of drink. Little by little, after the first miserable discovery that his wife was keeping company with drunkards, the shocking certainty forced itself on Isaac that she had grown to be a drunkard herself.

He had been in a sadly desponding state for some time before the occurrence of these domestic calamities. His mother's health, as he could but too plainly discern every time he went to see her at the cottage, was failing fast; and he upbraided himself in secret as the cause of the bodily and mental suffering she endured. When to his remorse on his mother's account was added the shame and misery occasioned by the discovery of his wife's degradation, he sank under the double trial, his face began to alter fast, and he looked, what he was, a spirit-broken man.

His mother, still struggling bravely against the illness that was hurrying her to her grave, was the first to notice the sad alteration in him, and the first to hear of his last, worst trouble with his wife. She could only weep bitterly, on the day when he made his humiliating confession; but on the next occasion when he went to see her, she had taken a resolution, in reference to his domestic afflictions, which astonished, and even alarmed him. He found her dressed to go out, and on asking the reason, received this answer:

"I am not long for this world, Isaac," she said; "and I shall not feel easy on my death-bed, unless I have done my best to the last to make my son happy. I mean to put my own fears and my own feelings out of the question, and to go with you to your wife, and try what I can do to reclaim her. Give me your arm, Isaac; and let me do the last thing I can in this world to help my son, before it is too late."

He could not disobey her; and they walked together slowly towards his miserable home.

It was only one o'clock in the afternoon when they reached the cottage where he lived. It was their dinner hour, and Rebecca was in the kitchen. He was thus able to take his mother quietly into the parlour and then prepare his wife for the interview. She had fortunately drunk but little at that early hour, and she was less sullen and capricious than usual.

He returned to his mother, with his mind tolerably at ease. His wife soon followed him into the parlour, and the meeting between her and Mrs. Scatchard passed off better than he had ventured to anticipate; though he observed, with secret apprehension, that his mother, resolutely as she controlled herself in other respects, could not look his wife in the face when she spoke to her. It was a relief to him, therefore, when Rebecca began to lay the cloth.

She laid the cloth, brought in the bread-tray, and cut a slice from the loaf for her husband, then returned to the kitchen. At that moment, Isaac, still anxiously watching his mother, was startled by seeing the same ghastly change pass over her face which had altered it so awfully on the morning when Rebecca and she first met. Before he could say a word, she whispered with a look of horror:

"Take me back!—home, home, again, Isaac! Come with me and never go back again!"

He was afraid to ask for an explanation; he could only sign to her to be silent, and help her quickly to the door. As they passed the bread-tray on the table, she stopped and pointed to it.

"Did you see what your wife cut your bread with?" she asked in a low whisper.

"No, mother; I was not noticing. What was it?"

"Look!"

He did look. A new clasp-knife, with a buckhorn handle, lay with the loaf in the bread-tray. He stretched out his hand, shudderingly, to possess himself of it; but at the same time there was a noise in the kitchen, and his mother caught at his arm.

"The knife of the dream! Isaac, I'm faint with fear—take me away, before she comes back!"

He was hardly able to support her. The visible, tangible reality of the knife struck him with a panic, and utterly destroyed any faint doubts he might have entertained up to this time, in relation to the mysterious dream-warning of nearly eight years before. By a last desperate effort, he summoned self-possession enough to help his mother

out of the house—so quietly, that the “Dream Woman” (he thought of her by that name now) did not hear their departure.

“Don’t go back, Isaac, don’t go back!” implored Mrs. Scatchard, as he turned to go away, after seeing her safely seated again in her own room.

“I must get the knife,” he answered under his breath. His mother tried to stop him again; but he hurried out without another word.

On his return, he found that his wife had discovered their secret departure from the house. She had been drinking, and was in a fury of passion. The dinner in the kitchen was flung under the grate; the cloth was off the parlour table. Where was the knife?

Unwisely, he asked for it. She was only too glad of the opportunity of irritating him, which the request afforded her. “He wanted the knife, did he? Could he give her a reason why?—No? Then he should not have it—not if he went down on his knees to ask for it.” Further recriminations elicited the fact that she had bought it as a bargain, and that she considered it her own especial property. Isaac saw the uselessness of attempting to get the knife by fair means, and determined to search for it, later in the day, in secret. The search was unsuccessful. Night came on, and he left the house to walk about the streets. He was afraid, now, to sleep in the same room with her.

Three weeks passed. Still sullenly enraged with him, she would not give up the knife; and still that fear of sleeping in the same room with her possessed him. He walked about at night, or dozed in the parlour, or sat watching by his mother’s bedside. Before the expiration of the first week in the new month his mother died. It wanted then but ten days of her son’s birthday. She had longed to live till that anniversary. Isaac was present at her death; and her last words in this world were addressed to him:

“Don’t go back, my son—don’t go back!”

He was obliged to go back, if it were only to watch his wife. Exasperated to the last degree by his distrust of her, she had revengefully sought to add a sting to his grief, during the last days of his mother’s illness, by declaring that she would assert her right to attend the funeral. In spite of all that he could do or say, she held with wicked pertinacity to her word; and on the day appointed for the burial, forced herself—inflamed and shameless with drink—into her husband’s presence, and declared that she would walk in the funeral procession to his mother’s grave.

This last, worst outrage, accompanied by all that was most insulting in word and look, maddened him for the moment. He struck her.

The instant the blow was dealt he repented it. She crouched down, silent, in a corner of the room, and eyed him steadily; it was a look that cooled his hot blood and made him tremble. But there was no time now to think of a means of making atonement. Nothing remained but to risk the worst till the funeral was over. There was but one way of making sure of her. He locked her into her bedroom.

When he came back, some hours after, he found her sitting, very much altered in look and bearing, by the bedside, with a bundle on her lap. She rose and faced him quietly, and spoke with a strange stillness in her voice, a strange repose in her eyes, a strange composure in her manner.

"No man has ever struck me twice," she said; "and my husband shall have no second opportunity. Set the door open and let me go. From this day forth we see each other no more."

Before he could answer she passed him, and left the room. He saw her walk away up the street.

Would she return?

All that night he watched and waited; but no footstep came near the house. The next night, overcome by fatigue, he lay down in bed in his clothes, with the door locked, the key on the table, and the candle burning. His slumber was not disturbed. The third night, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth passed, and nothing happened. He lay down on the seventh, still in his clothes, still with the door locked, the key on the table, and the candle burning; but easier in his mind.

Easier in his mind, and in perfect health of body, when he fell off to sleep. But his rest was disturbed. He woke twice, without any sensation of uneasiness. But the third time it was that never-to-be-forgotten shivering of the night at the lonely inn, that dreadful sinking pain at the heart, which once more aroused him in an instant.

His eyes opened towards the left-hand side of the bed, and there stood . . .

The Dream Woman again? No! His wife; the living reality, with the dream-spectre's face—in the dream-spectre's attitude; the fair arm up; the knife clasped in the delicate, white hand.

He sprang upon her almost at the instant of seeing her, and yet not quickly enough to prevent her from hiding the knife. Without a word from him, without a cry from her, he pinioned her in a chair. With one hand he felt up her sleeve; and there, where the Dream Woman had hidden the knife, his wife had hidden it—the knife with the buck-horn handle, that looked like new.

In the despair of that fearful moment his brain was steady, his heart was calm. He looked at her fixedly, with the knife in his hand, and said these last words:

"You told me we should see each other no more, and you have come back. It is my turn now to go, and to go for ever. *I* say that we shall see each other no more; and *my* word shall not be broken."

He left her, and set forth into the night. There was a bleak wind abroad, and the smell of recent rain was in the air. The distant church clocks chimed the quarter as he walked rapidly beyond the last houses in the suburb. He asked the first policeman he met, what hour that was, of which the quarter past had just struck.

The man referred sleepily to his watch, and answered, "Two o'clock." Two in the morning. What day of the month was this day that had just begun? He reckoned it up from the date of his mother's funeral. The fatal parallel was complete—it was his birthday!

Had he escaped the mortal peril which his dream foretold? Or had he only received a second warning?

As this ominous doubt forced itself on his mind, he stopped, reflected, and turned back again towards the city. He was still resolute to hold to his word, and never to let her see him more; but there was a thought now in his mind of having her watched and followed. The knife was in his possession; the world was before him; but a new distrust of her—a vague, unspeakable, superstitious dread—had overcome him.

"I must know where she goes, now she thinks I have left her," he said to himself, as he stole back wearily to the precincts of his house.

It was still dark. He had left the candle burning in the bedchamber, but when he looked up to the window of the room now, there was no light in it. He crept cautiously to the house door. On going away, he remembered to have closed it; on trying it now, he found it open.

He waited outside, never losing sight of the house till daylight. Then he ventured indoors—listened, and heard nothing—looked into kitchen, scullery, parlour; and found nothing: went up at last into the bedroom—it was empty. A picklock lay on the floor, betraying how she had gained entrance in the night, and that was the only trace of her. There was no other.

Whither had she gone? No mortal tongue could tell him. The darkness had covered her flight; and when the day broke no man could say where the light found her.

Before leaving the house and the town for ever, he gave instructions to a friend and neighbour to sell his furniture for anything that it would fetch, and to apply the proceeds towards employing the police to trace

her. The directions were honestly followed, and the money was all spent; but the enquiries led to nothing. The picklock on the bedroom floor remained the last useless trace of the Dream Woman.

At this part of the narrative the landlord paused; and, turning towards the window of the room in which we were sitting, looked in the direction of the stable-yard.

"So far," he said, "I tell you what was told to me. The little that remains to be added lies within my own experience. Between two and three months after the events I have just been relating, Isaac Scatchard came to me, withered and old-looking before his time, just as you saw him to-day. He had his testimonials to character with him, and he asked me for employment here. Knowing that my wife and he were distantly related, I gave him a trial in consideration of that relationship, and liked him in spite of his queer habits. He is as sober, honest, and willing a man as there is in England. As for his restlessness at night, and his sleeping away his leisure time in the day, who can wonder at it after hearing his story? Besides, he never objects to being roused up, when he's wanted, so there's not much inconvenience to complain of, after all."

"I suppose he is afraid of a return of that dreadful dream, and of waking out of it in the dark?"

"No," returned the landlord. "The dream comes back to him so often, that he has got to bear with it by this time resignedly enough. It's his wife keeps him waking at night, as he has often told me."

"What! Has she never been heard of yet?"

"Never. Isaac himself has the one perpetual thought, that she is alive and looking for him. I believe he wouldn't let himself drop off to sleep towards two in the morning for a king's ransom. Two in the morning, he says, is the time she will find him, one of these days. Two in the morning is the time, all the year round, when he likes to be most certain that he has got the clasp-knife safe about him. He does not mind being alone, as long as he is awake, except on the night before his birthday, when he firmly believes himself to be in peril of his life. The birthday has only come round once since he has been here, and then he sat up along with the night-porter. 'She's looking for me,' is all he says, when anybody speaks to him about the one anxiety of his life; 'she's looking for me.' He may be right. She *may* be looking for him. Who can tell?"

"Who can tell?" said I.

THE RAINY NIGHT

by **HAL ELLSON**

THE rain fell with a soft whispering sound. At midnight the guards entered the Barge Office and sat down. Hoarse voices of ships in the harbor, crying their anguished warnings, made the men uneasy. A long night lay ahead.

One man had called in sick. Three were on duty. There was not much to be done till morning. Only the records to check. They started on these, as if to escape the gloom of the night, finished quickly, sat back again and stared at each other like strangers, each waiting for the other to break the silence.

Finally Williams got up and went to the stove. "Feels like the fire's going out," he said and gave it a shake, a bit of coal and sat down again.

"It's chilly in here," Johnson remarked.

"Damp," said Sandstrom. He was a new man.

"Always is on the waterfront," Williams answered. "You can't get away from it."

"It's too quiet," said Johnson. "I hope something comes up."

"In that case, you'll have to go out in the rain. It's coming down hard now. Listen."

They all listened. The rain drummed steadily on the roof.

"How about some tea?" Williams suggested, breaking the silence.

The others nodded. He put the water on.

"Call the tug-dispatcher," Johnson said to Sandstrom. "Ask if there'll be any ship movements."

Sandstrom picked up the phone, spoke to the dispatcher. "Nothing coming or going," he said, cradling the phone.

"Good," said Williams.

They sat in silence again, listening to the rain. A long, stabbing wail came from the harbor. Presently the water on the stove began to boil. The first pleasant sound of the night.

Williams busied himself with the cups, made the tea quickly and set it before the others. They drank slowly. Outside, the rain fell steadily, the

wind was rising.

"God, it's morbid," Sandstrom remarked. "Anything ever happen here?"

"Sometimes," Williams answered, pouring a second cup of tea.

They sat in silence then. The wind was still rising, keening loudly, driving the rain against the shack. A feeling of loneliness filled the night. The three men stared vacantly. The phone rang.

Johnson answered it. "We're wanted on a searching party, so we'll have to check the barges now," he said.

"Nice weather for something like that," Williams growled.

Johnson played with his pencil. "Orders," he said. "Hell!" He stood up. "Guess you and I better check the barges, Williams. Sandstrom's a little raw yet. It'll be tough in the dark."

Williams got to his feet, donned his raincoat. Johnson did the same and turned to Sandstrom.

"Don't fall asleep," he warned.

"What about me going out? I've got to break in sometimes."

"Forget it. You'll get your share later," Johnson answered and went to the door. Williams followed him out. The door slammed.

Sandstrom listened till their voices faded under the sound of the rain. He felt cut off now, as if no one were within miles. The wind blew, the rain continued to fall. Despite the warmth of the stove, the chill of the night crept slowly into the shack, bringing with it a deeper, more poignant feeling of loneliness.

Uneasy now, Sandstrom began to wait. A half hour passed like eternity, for there was nothing to do, and to think was but to think of the storm. He glanced at his watch and wished for daylight. It was a long way off. The rain kept falling and the wind sobbed.

Finally he nodded off and awakened to a sharp knock on the door. "Come in," he said, and the door opened slowly.

A man stepped in hesitantly. He was very short, with small features and delicate hands. A goatee concealed his chin. Rain dripped from his dark coat and Homburg.

"May I help you?" Sandstrom asked.

"I'm looking for my ship, the *West Greenwich*. I'd like to know which pier she's at."

"What credentials have you?"

The man nodded to the briefcase under his arm. "My papers are here. I'm the Master of the *West Greenwich*."

"The Master?" Sandstrom showed his surprise.

"Yes, the Master," the man said quietly but in a way that showed he

was accustomed to confirming his status.

Sandstrom nodded, and studied a concealed board that indicated the ships at berth in the port. Twice he perused it, then looked up.

"No ship in by that name. How come they let you through the gate?"

"The guards sent me here. They said you might know. Last time I was in, they did the same."

"That's against regulations."

"But you're supposed to know every ship in this terminal."

"That's beside the point. You shouldn't have been let through."

"I know." The man smiled as if the situation amused him now. "But my ship's in here," he insisted quietly but firmly.

"Perhaps she's due, or maybe at dry-dock."

"No, she's in good shape, and she's here," the man insisted and suddenly covered his eyes. When he removed his hand he looked worn and tired.

"You see, I don't remember the number of the pier," he went on. "Pier fourteen comes to my mind, but I'm not certain."

"There's no ship on fourteen," Sandstrom answered, and the man stared at him in disbelief, then once more insisted his ship was in.

Sandstrom didn't reply. There was no sound of wind nor rain now, and this silence sent a chill through him as he gazed at the man before him. There was something about him.

"Then you can't help me out?"

"No, but perhaps if you walk to fourteen, you'll satisfy yourself that no ship is there."

The man sent him an odd wistful smile and left the office. The sound of the wind and rain came back. Overhead in the dark, huge black wings seemed to be beating. Sandstrom went to a window and watched the man who'd just left. He was only a shadow now. The rain and the dark swallowed him up.

An hour later he jumped up as the door opened. Williams entered the shack. He took off his wet clothes, cursed the night, put the water on for tea and lit a cigarette.

Johnson returned a half-hour later. Tea was waiting for him. He drank it, no one spoke. The three of them sat listening to the storm.

Suddenly Sandstrom leaned forward. "Almost forgot," he said. "A man was here. Claimed he was Captain of the *West Greenwich*."

"No ship in by that name," Johnson said, shaking his head. "How'd the guy get past the gate?"

"The guards let him through. He had his papers."

"He shouldn't have been let through."

The conversation lapsed. The fire sputtered and crackled in the stove.

Johnson finished his tea, started on the records, then looked up at Sandstrom.

"The *West Greenwich*," he said. "Sounds familiar. If I'm not mistaken. . . ."

He went to the log-book and thumbed through it, turning back month after month. He was about to give up when he found it.

"Here she is. I took her in. I . . ."

Suddenly he stopped and stared at Sandstrom.

"The Captain was in here? A short man, with a goatee?"

"Yes."

"Impossible! The *West Greenwich* went down in the North Atlantic over a year ago. There were no survivors."

The three men stared at each other. No one spoke for a while. Finally Williams said, "Maybe the fellow who came in just happened to resemble the Captain of the *West Greenwich*, and maybe there's another ship with the same name."

Johnson shook his head and sat down. Outside, the rain fell heavily, the wind whined. He listened, then turned to Williams.

"There's no ship movements, but I'll call the dispatcher," he said and lifted the phone. "Any arrivals?" he asked the dispatcher.

"None."

Johnson put down the phone. "No arrivals, no *West Greenwich*. She was sunk," he said. "There were no survivors."

Sandstrom paled. Williams stared at him now. "You know, when I came in from checking the piers, you were dozing," he said.

"So?"

"So you must have dreamed that damned story."

"The hell I did."

"Wait a minute. Don't get hot, boys," Johnson lifted the phone, called the gate and put down the phone again.

"Nobody answering the description of the Captain came through."

Sandstrom looked stunned, and now even he doubted the reality of the meeting. But suddenly he leaned forward again and said, "Tell me this. I'm new here, so how would I know such a ship even existed, or be able to describe the Captain if I hadn't seen him?"

Williams and Johnson looked at each other.

"Well," asked Sandstrom.

"You must have had a weird dream," Johnson offered limply, and the three of them sat silent.

Rain flailed the windows, the wind screamed. There were no other sounds to be heard.

●



OF HAIRY SNAKES

by **PAT REMLIK**

ELEVEN minutes out of Lima, Peru, the Trans-Spanster set us down in a remote mountain area four hundred miles from the city. That was as close as we could get to Monte Cuesperto in a ship of that size.

From somewhere close to where we landed, the Atom Escapists had started their foot journey in 1950. A weary, flesh-bruising journey it must have been, for the trail leading to the caves was steep, the terrain strewn with boulders and small jagged rocks.

Gazing around, I wished our errand was less urgent. But on this sunny day of February 6, 2004 A.D., no one knew better than I the desperate importance of locating our quarry as soon as possible.

I, Jerome Aylesworth, senior geneticist, was in charge of the expedition that went in search of the Atom Escapists. And a dead-in-earnest expedition it was. We were in search of a hope for the salvation of Man, *normal* Man, as a species. If the 100 people who retired from the upper earth to escape what they termed "inevitable destruction" had survived their experience they were the only unpolluted people alive!

The grim truth is that in the race for the most of the deadliest, Man had befouled himself. Not a single human left on the face of the globe was fit to perpetuate his kind. The effects of radiation had been suffered by all. If it had not already done its deadly work, it would become active in the weeks or years to come of this generation, or the next or the next. It would continue to produce the undesirable inheritance characteristics known as mutation. Mutation had begun after the

dropping of the first A-bomb, the Hiroshima blast, and by now had increased a million fold, to spread like a pestilence throughout the world. The world was sick with a sickness for which there was no cure unless the Atom Escapists provided the answers.

Babies were being born with too many or too few limbs, with one or more of the five senses missing or defective. Other babies were being born who possessed an eerie power to see into the past or future, *extra* senses which more often than not, they used to evil purpose. Infants able to ape but not reason, walked when they were days old; inversely, geniuses spoke words almost with their first breath, became incredible scholars in their cradles—and never walked. There was neither form nor pattern to the fearful phenomena. No two of the defectives were alike. Nature seemed bent on a program of terrible parody.

Too, there existed a cruel paradox. The very thing that created all this was now harnessed, had been converted to good rather than evil. Mechanical marvels rolled off assembly lines; manual labor was practically non-existent; travel was just a question of naming a destination; disease had been conquered. In brief, contentment and happiness now came off drawing boards, longevity out of flasks.

And for whom? A worldful of monsters, either actual or potential, who every day, every hour, every minute, produced beings even more monstrous than themselves. The problem of mutation was more than grave—it was insurmountable by scientific means, as exhaustive experimentation and research had already proven.

And so the 12 of us, geneticists all, went deep into the heart of Peru to bring back the only *clean* humans known to exist. Or rather, we hoped they still existed underground, and in that way had escaped the fate of all those living on the earth's surface.

If they had, they would soon be pampered people, indeed. They would be protected in all possible ways against contamination. To that end, love, the usual hand-maiden of mating, would be ignored unless—unlikely enough—it occurred coincidentally. Strictest supervision over mating, shifting and remating, would be necessary to preclude inbreeding. Conception at the earliest as well as the latest possible age would be encouraged; where necessary known means of hastening the onset and lengthening the duration of the conceptive period would be employed. Universal birth control, voluntary when possible—otherwise enforced, would be practiced; complete extinction of our polluted earthlings was imperative.

Regrettably, since only Caucasians had joined the Atom Escapists, the other races would have to go. We were not unaware of the ruthless-

ness of our plan, but took some comfort from the knowledge that, fortunately, physical violence would not occur. Quietly, sanely, painlessly, extermination could be accomplished.

Significant of our determination—and desperation—is the fact that we were not concerned with the probability that the Atom Escapists would not consent to exploitation. We intended to use them regardless of their own wishes in the matter.

Finally, after weeks of planning and preparation we arrived at the place from which the real search was to begin, and unloaded ourselves and our supplies from the Trans-Spanster. Luckily, we would not have to trudge the tiresome miles the Atom Escapists had trodden in the final stage of their retirement. Each member of our party was equipped with Ornitho Wings, capable of lifting him high above the ground indefinitely with complete maneuverability.

Ornitho Packwings, radar controlled, followed after us carrying our equipment and supplies. Supplies were kept at minimum requirement—nutrient tablets so highly concentrated that a month's supply for an adult weighed no more than a pound; water capsules that gathered pure water from the moisture in the air, making it unnecessary to camp near fresh water, took up little space; clothes which drew heat from the sun—or repelled it as required—were almost without bulk; tents made of a pliable gauze-like material, similar to glass but not transparent, also drew or repelled sun heat. The tent walls reflected and regulated light so as to maintain a glareless glow in the daytime, reversing the process to effect a soft, dawn-like dimness at night. Should brighter light be required at night, a system of storage tubes provided it at the touch of a button.

Each of us carried an Audio receiver-sender, a Pararay wand, and a red cylinder. The Pararay wand is a harmless instrument, meant to be used only in cases of extreme danger, to paralyze temporarily, giving the endangered person a chance for escape. Man no longer killed for killing's sake. The finger-length fire cylinder, whose self-replenishing elements make it everlasting, has dozens of applications; its flame can be extended to 15 feet or kept to a fraction of an inch at the will of the user.

The largest and heaviest piece of equipment we carried was the Home Detectograph—nicknamed Homo—a device perfected some years ago for the purpose of hunting down those few scientific gentlemen who had been reluctant to stop producing war material.

From our landing place, we flew in Ornitho Wings formation to within 20 miles of Monte Cuesperto, the small mountain peak above the

caves to which the Atom Escapists were known to have gone. The precise location of the cave entrance was not known, so it was decided that the party would make camp while one of us went ahead to search out the entrance. Having found it, he would then return and fetch the others.

I drew the privilege of being the one to go ahead. The fact that savage tribes of Indians might very well inhabit this wild and undeveloped country raised no fear in me. I had the Pararay wand. My only fear was that I might fail in my mission.

The newspapers of the time in which the Atom Escapists had withdrawn from the upper earth had treated the whole project as a crackpot scheme. The papers had laughed at the mushroom-like vegetable, called "Manna," which the Atom Escapists had propagated for food. The press had pooh-poohed their ability to avoid inbreeding. To the latter jibe, the leader of the group had replied, "Perfection is preserved through perfection. Only perfect specimens are being taken with us. We shall *keep* them that way."

Naturally, there were a number of ways in which I could fail, the least being inability to find the cave entrance, the greatest being the possibility that the Atom Escapists had not survived.

Gliding slowly and scanning the terrain, I separated Monte Cuesperto from its neighboring peaks just at twilight. Since it would soon be dark, I decided to make camp and wait for daylight, for the final stage of my search would have to be conducted on foot.

In the vicinity of my campsite there was typically tropical growth, including many flowering plants, growing too lush and too close together. The spot was unbelievably beautiful and at the same time incredibly hideous, for mutation had attacked *all* living things. I had seen domestic animals bear savage progeny, and the young of vicious animals emerge from the woods to be fed by hand. I had seen cats with the beginning of smooth, scaly hide, and snakes with hair. I had grown used to roses two feet in diameter and orchids regressed to diminutives no larger than pea blossoms.

Nothing should have startled me. Yet here, where there was too much of everything, where lovely blossoms rubbed petals with drab-hued sticky flowers that held small animals captive, I found the superb overpowering and the abundance horrifying.

For the first time apprehension nudged me. I saw no animals of any kind, yet my mind envisioned rabbits grown to horse size and turned ferocious. The dead animals imprisoned by the horrible flowers suggested worse possibilities. . . .

I wanted desperately to contact my companions via the Audio re-

ceiver-sender, to have the reassurance of their voices, but I dared not risk it. The entrance to the caves might be very near; voices might attract unwanted attention and put the Atom Escapists on guard, cause them to anticipate my purpose and do something to defeat it.

So I drew on my early training, reminding myself that logic is the natural enemy of fear. I told myself that so far as was known, no flower had ever devoured a man—no animal, however large and ferocious, withstood the power of the Pararay wand. I was able to refrain from beaming my voice to the others or open the receiver that would bring theirs to me—but barely.

Setting up camp took only minutes. Then I swallowed some nutrient tablets and washed them down with water already collected in a container holding one of the water capsules.

By then I should have been ready for sleep, yet I had never been more awake. Knowing that I was on the verge of what could prove to be the salvation of my kind created a flare of inner eagerness to get started, yet at the same time my eagerness was tempered by the knowledge that I myself could never be more than a dedicated worker in the cause. True, dedication itself offered a measure of compensation, but it was not always enough. A man dreams of fathering sons and daughters. . . . There was a girl at home, a lovely golden creature . . .

At midnight by the luminous chronadial on my wrist I was still awake, and suddenly had an irresistible impulse to actuate the Homo Detectograph. I had barely started the machine when it began to hum in the immediacy tone. Somewhere in the darkness outside there were humans, and from the almost hysterical humming of Homo, they were close at hand.

I had to discipline the part of me that wanted to dash out and confront those humans. After all, Homo was only proving they were near, not who they were. They could be the Atom Escapists, but they could also be unfriendly natives.

"Hold up," I admonished myself. "This could mean what you hope it means, or it could be otherwise—and disaster."

I switched off Homo, waited quietly for a short while, then ventured out to investigate. Nothing. No one. Whoever had been near evidently had not spotted my camp or had ignored it.

Back in my tent, I put myself to sleep without bothering to undress, wanting now only to hurry through the night and be ready for whatever day brought.

Self-induced hypnotic sleep is mainly physical. The body assumes an inertia that is restful and requires several seconds to throw off, but

the senses merely relax, are instantly alert at any command from the subconscious.

So I felt, heard, saw and smelled my attackers before my body knew the danger to it or could coordinate in a stand against that danger. I even noted the time, three a.m., before I made a defensive move.

By then it was too late. I could not even cry out. Something cold and slippery was pressed against my mouth, effectively gagging me. I kicked out and my legs were instantly caught and held. Thrashing my arms about proved equally futile, for they were quickly pinioned to my sides. I was thoroughly and completely immobilized, and yet there was something of gentleness about the whole procedure. Whatever the intent of my attackers, they were not trying to hurt me.

Against the soft dark in my tent my captors were dimly silhouetted. Rising at uneven heights like wide, gray pickets in a fence, they appeared only two-dimensional, weird. I estimated that there were 10 or 12 of them hemming me in. They threw off a musty odor that was intolerably offensive, and emitted a low hissing sound not unlike the humming of bees. I was lifted and carried outside.

I would like to say that I was not frightened, that the tide of emotion churning inside me was mere curiosity. But though much has been done to banish fear through logic, fear is innate in everything that breathes, and in Man, needs only a brush with the unknown to rouse it. Too, the very basis of logic is knowledge, and there was nothing within my knowing to understand this experience.

Where my arms were held against my body I could feel the outlines of things I had not removed from my tunic slots. The flat container for my nutrient tablets was there, the one holding the water capsules, and the fire cylinder. There was little comfort in those items, however; I would rather have had the receiver-sender and the Pararay wand with me.

Walled in by my bearers, I seemed to be floating horizontally. Overhead the sky looked dark and unfriendly, sinister, the perfect setting for some horrible probability. At one point the gag was removed from across my mouth, and I immediately cried out, "Put me down!" Instantly, the gag was replaced.

Somehow I worked one of my hands loose and felt around. Clamped to my body at spaced intervals within reach were lumps of flesh with elongations that had to be fingers. Hands, of course. Hands!—the flesh was cold and slimy, evoking the image of congealed blood.

They have to be people, I thought, but what kind of people? What

known race could have an offshoot that hisses constantly, that smells so horribly? My greatest discomfort came from the odor, and my effort to keep from breathing it in finally induced congestion in my lungs. That, combined with the rapid beating of my heart—and possibly a willingness to do so—caused me to lose consciousness.

I do not know for how long I was unconscious. The next time I was fully aware, my bearers and I were no longer outdoors. The atmosphere was moist and dank. I could tell that I was being borne downward, and judging by the nearness of those who carried me, we were in a narrow passage.

It took no imagination to realize that we were underground, rather than in a building. And since the Atom Escapists had entered their caves in this vicinity, it followed that they either had frightful and mysterious neighbors or, what seemed more likely, had long since been destroyed by these—whatever they were.

The pressure at my sides decreased as I was carried into a larger place, a place with the feeling of spaciousness and coolness and moisture. I was seated upon a flat projection and propped against a damp wall. I could hear the drip, drip, of water close by—the only familiar sound I heard. Other sounds were the eternal hissing and a soft shuffling as my captors moved away from me. Remembering how I had been silenced earlier, I made no sound myself, wanting no more physical contact with those hands.

It took some time for my eyes to get accustomed to the grayish twilight. Then I saw what I already suspected, that I was in a large cavern. Rising like ghosts here and there were tall stalagmites from which the dim twilight seemed to reflect, and the beauty of which I might have appreciated more—in other circumstances.

I was apart, yet far from alone. Having released me, my captors joined others like themselves. I could not tell how many of them there were, but any number was too many. All appeared to be of average adult height, and now they achieved a third dimension. All seemed to be so nearly the same gray as the dim light that they actually blended into it to the point of invisibility when a little distance away, then again becoming shapeless individuals when close. Recalling the clammy cold of their hands, my mind fashioned a picture of giant slugs standing on end.

At first I assumed them to be naked. Then, as I grew more used to the twilight, I saw that they were swathed in a gray, clinging material. Later I learned that it was made from sheets of the strong mossy growth that covered part of the cave walls.

I supposed they had gender, though there was no way I could tell one sex from the other. Their bodies all looked alike and, except for the occasional glitter of eyes, I saw nothing of their faces because of the long, beast-like growth of hair each had.

Their movement was slow—more like progressive undulation than walking. The hissing never stopped, though in the cavern it sounded almost like solidified, mass whispering. Unable to cast them in any human category, my mind named them *things*.

They seemed content to leave me to my own devices at first, and from that I took courage. I even rose and took a few experimental steps away from my rock seat. But I could not see well, and kept stumbling into little piles of rubble that threatened to trip and throw me. Too, I noticed a change in the tone pattern of the hissing when I rose, which I thought might be a manifestation of displeasure. I had no wish to displease my hosts, and so decided to remain quiet until I could formulate a plan, and get some bearings by which to execute it.

Oddly, the manifestation, whatever it signified, served to lift the *things* a degree above earthworms in my opinion, for it proved that they had responsive impulses. Under other conditions, I should have considered them a provocative study in ethnology. Right then, though, I was interested in them only in relation to myself. Why had they brought me here? . . . What were they going to do with me, or to me? . . . How could I escape?

I could expect no help from my companions. They would not become anxious about me for days, since they did not anticipate word from me until I had either succeeded or failed in my assignment. By the time they did become anxious . . . Well, I chose not to dwell on what might have happened to me by then.

I had been thinking, motionless and silent on my rock seat for some time, when the occurrence that made my insides writhe with revulsion, took place. With a suction pull, one of the *things* passed its slimy hand slowly across my cheek. It meant no harm. It was gentle. The gesture was actually the equivalent of petting, but it was utterly repulsive to me.

In the next few minutes many of the *things* petted me, and I flinched each time. Yet, I was somehow aware that it was all an expression of welcome, that I was a one-man receiving line.

Eventually the reception was over. The *things* moved away from me and kept their distance. As yet unharmed, if I discount my state of mind, I found myself suddenly more afraid than I had ever before

been. Their very *friendliness* frightened me, probably because it was harder to fathom than open hostility would have been. I fell into a sort of catalepsy, unable to move, cry out, or even think clearly.

At that point, I suppose a braver man would have made some positive move toward escape. But I claim no tendency to heroics. Instead I managed to slump from my seat to the cave floor. I deliberately put myself to sleep, thus achieving physical immunity at least, for it seemed unlikely that they would begin petting me again, soon.

Four hours later I awakened. I know the time because my first act was to consult the chronadial; more, if the truth must be admitted, to ascertain the day of the month than the time of day. I started, unbelieving. In relation to all that had transpired, it did not seem possible that only hours had passed since my abduction. I felt as though I had been suspended in a nightmare for an interminable length of time. Yet there was proof that that was not so: 7:30 a.m., February 7, 2004 A.D.

The *things* were still weaving about, their gray swathing dragging by; there was still the endless hissing, the awful smell. However, undoubtedly because rest had calmed me, my point of view was changed. The *things* now appeared more stupid and helpless than dangerous. Realizing that, I grew in mental stature. After all, I was a superior being, a man, while they were—what? Animals that had achieved a stage of evolution in which they stood upright. Surely I was more than a match for them!

Feeling courageous, now, I reached for my nutrient container and swallowed two tablets, then rolled to where the dripping water could wash into my mouth. The *things* must have been aware of this activity, but it did not rouse them. Additional confidence flowed through me. I had no thought of physical combat, but now I was sure I could outwit them.

I glanced cautiously around, needing first of all to know the point of egress. I made out a number of arched openings spaced around the cavern walls. A wetted finger held up located the only opening through which came a draft; that would be the one that led to the surface; the others had to be openings into other cave rooms.

Easily, not obviously, I would inch toward the passage leading out. Once there, I would rise and make a run for it . . .

Occupied with putting that plan into operation and making some slight progress, I was not at first alarmed at the increase in the volume of the hissing. Not until I heard the distressed cry of an animal and felt the beast fling itself against me did I notice an excited rapidity in the

way the *things* moved, and that they were converging upon me.

The animal's whining rose in shrill crescendo, echoing and re-echoing through the caves like nothing I had ever heard. It was still crouched against me, and I reached to stroke it, to comfort it, neither knowing or caring whether or not it was a wild animal, feeling, rather, a kind of partisanship with it. It was trembling from fear. I could tell by its size and sleekness that it was a member of the cat family, probably a cougar.

Then it was seized and snatched away. The whining changed to savage growling and snarling, died to a throaty gurgle, then ceased altogether.

Not far from me and on a level with my eyes a number of the *things* were down on the floor, heads forward and bobbing horribly. There was a vile sound of sucking. In a few minutes they rose and backed away from a heap of fleshless bone and sticky, wet fur.

I knew then what the piles of rubble I had stumbled into earlier were.

My new courage went out of me in a breath. The fear I had experienced before was nothing by comparison with the sheer terror I now knew. These could be anything from remnants of ancient immolationists to cannibals. Probably I was still alive because they were saving me from some special occasion, some awful ceremonial rite. True, they seemed of low mental caliber for ceremony of any kind, but sacrificial rite has never been a question of mental calibration. It was one of the first known forms of organized activity.

I do not know at what saving instant my ego re-asserted itself to remind me of my superiority. I do know that I was not far from frenzy, when it happened, when I was suddenly on my feet, standing full height, screaming, "I will not be sacrificed!"

The cave ceiling evidently had the properties of a natural sounding board. My voice crashed against it, hung there for a second, then bounced off and went rolling in and out of the other cave rooms, the volume decreasing gradually until the last tone died.

"Yes, you will, in a way, be sacrificed," came a whisper at my ear.

I could not be hearing that. The experience had been too much for me. My power to think and reason had disintegrated. "No—no—NO!" I shouted, unthinkingly.

"No, oh—no, oh—NO, OH," sang the cave ceiling.

"Keep your voice down," the whisperer at my ear warned. "That was one of the first things we learned. The vibration is deadly for

the ears and nerves."

I was hearing it. One of the *things* was standing beside me, sending off its terrible stench, speaking. Factual significance came slowly, in steps. The *thing* spoke . . . it spoke my own tongue . . . it used words like 'vibration' and 'nerves.' Also, all other sound had ceased, except the dripping water; movement, too, as if a leader had been appointed and his leadership were being honored.

"Please do not be frightened," the whisper went on.

"I will not be," I started to scream, then stopping as my words began to thunder from the ceiling. "I do not know what you think you are doing, and I do not care. I demand that you release me!"

"We cannot do that. You are most important to us."

More of the people—I could no longer think of them as *things*, drew near. They stood quietly by, leaning forward as if to spring. I thought of the cougar, so recently alive.

"Who are you—what are you—*why* are you?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"You are entitled to answers to those questions," the whisperer agreed. "Perhaps we should have told you at once, but you did not seem in a receptive state of mind. However, I shall clarify everything now. We are, briefly, a group of people who left the upper earth in 1950 to escape the destruction of Man by Man."

I screamed and the echo smashed into my eardrums.

"You must keep your voice down! Why are you screaming?"

"You are not—you cannot be—I will not believe that you are the Atom Escapists."

"So you know about us—we anticipated as much. Yes, that is what the newspapers facetiously called us. But I am afraid we have failed in our purpose—temporarily."

There was a buzz of comment which I took for approval, though I did not know what was being approved. But now I understood why I had not discovered earlier that these people talked. When a number of them whispered at the same time the result was a sound maze from which no syllable stood apart to the untrained ear, and that was especially confusing to one not expecting to hear words—or too apprehensive to concentrate on any sound beyond the beating of his own heart. Now that the buzzing dissolved into words, it had rather a soothing effect on me. Or the effect may have come from the knowledge that, at least, no bodily harm was imminent. Or from the realization that I had found what I had set out to find.

Well, not exactly what I had set out to find. But they *were* human,

and they *were* unpolluted. Unfortunately precious time would be lost in conditioning them for breeding, but their undefiled inheritance characteristics would eventually overcome their pitiful regression. Strange to be thinking of saving in these people the very thing we wanted to destroy in all others: inheritance characteristics.

"Yes, I know about you," I admitted. "But the Atom Escapists were reported to have been carefully selected, to have been—" It was impossible to go on. How could I say that nothing in the reports had prepared me for what I found here?

"I know," the speaker for the group answered. "We were, indeed, carefully selected. Sadly, the only thing we have been able to preserve whole is our speech. However, a good many unforeseen circumstances contributed to our present state. First, the running stream we counted on for water went dry, leaving only the inadequate supply that drips from the walls. Then, the food we expected to sustain us—the 'Manna' you undoubtedly read of—did not have the proper nutritional balance. It lacked essential vitamins and minerals, and had to be supplemented with meat. Only meat that could be snared inside the cave entrance was available, since we did not go outside for any purpose. You can see how limiting that would be."

"But you could have cooked the meat, surely," I said, remembering the grisly scene with the animal.

"At first we did cook it. But fire within the caves formed poisonous gases; gases that accounted for some deaths. We were fortunate to have found it out before all of us died."

"But—?"

"But how did we reach the point of eating like animals? At first we dried and aged the meat before eating it. Then, as it became increasingly hard to snare food animals, we became more and more hungry, too hungry to wait."

"I am surprised that you did not give up. You must have been aware of what was happening to you. Why didn't you return to the surface?"

"And risk what we came here to escape."

"What you came here to escape has not occurred. There has been no world-destroying war!" I lied. "You may safely emerge. I have, in fact, come to fetch you."

"That is kind of you, but we do not intend to leave the caves. As long as Man can *contrive* mass killing, he will not stop short of total destruction. No, we shall remain here, but we are not going to continue as we are."

Obviously, they would have to be forced from hiding. I could do nothing alone except delude them for now, get away and return with reinforcements. They were insane, of course, but in a gentle, not inheritable way. And who would not be insane in these circumstances? Due to their unnatural food, they exuded a thick, almost jelly-like perspiration, which accounted for the sliminess of their skin. There was not sufficient water for bathing; the caves were damp and humid, evaporation slow, accounting for the terrible odor. Their gray pallor was simply a matter of starved pigment. Hungry enough and with no restraining influence I, too, might revert to eating like a predatory animal. Yes, I, too, would be gently insane under these conditions.

Suddenly, I felt overwhelming sympathy for the Atom Escapists. Yet I did know that I could not abandon my purpose, and the only hope for Man's salvation.

"I understand your feelings," I whispered. "But I should think fresh air and sunshine would be your first thought, now that you know there has been no great war," I lied once more.

"Fresh air and sunshine are desirable but not essential to life, as we have already proven. We fear the surface and will not return to it!"

"You came to get *me*," I pointed out with simple logic, then asked. "Why?"

"Yes." Following my informant's intonation of this single word, gravely, it seemed, there was a sudden, long silence. The voice continued then, breaking off abruptly in mid-sentence. "You will be made comfortable, and we hope you will conform . . ."

A note of threat, the first, had crept into the whisper. Without my full understanding of why, I felt my body hairs rise.

The voice whispered on. I was told how they had learned to fashion their primitive clothing from the mossy growth. I was told that from this point forward, they meant to progress instead of regress. "Now we can overcome our greatest obstacle . . ."

But I was only half hearing. I was trying to edge toward the outward passage and I was being hindered, unobtrusively yet firmly, and was being warned against further attempts by a noticeable change in the tone pattern of the buzzing. Nevertheless, I had to find a way out. Controlling the Atom Escapists when we returned offered no problem; our Paraway wands and hypnosis would take care of that.

"I do not know how old I am," the leader was whispering. "What year is this?"

"Two thousand four," I answered, automatically.

"So we are in the 21st century—I thought as much. I am 67 years of age, then."

I saw or sensed then what I should have realized much earlier. Everyone present was old! But that was understandable—naturally, the elders of the group would be the one to explain things to me. The young adults and the children would remain in the background, in the other cave rooms. If these monstrous beings were the elders, I thought, what sort of creatures would the younger Atom Escapists be? Were they in the same pitiful state of regression as the whispering creatures surrounding me now—or were they in less-advanced stages? Were they recognizable as humans, or had they, too, been affected by these unnatural living conditions?

"So," the whisperer went on, "we must keep you here and get others like you—"

The flashing realization—the enormity—of what was being said struck me like a white-hot mallet!

"... a young female next, of course, so no time will be lost. Man must not die out, must not!"

I knew then, but my mind would not accept it, *could* not accept it. It had to hope—to pray—that it was not correctly interpreting what the speaker said.

"But you don't need me—your own people can carry on—can't they?" My voice rose in hysteria.

The voice droned on in reply. "Our near-starvation diet lacked essentials—vitamins and minerals—and caused us to lose our ability to reproduce. Fertility has never returned to us. Not a child has been conceived here. Far too long we were resigned to our fate, but our plan will work . . ."

My brain pounded in the agony of awareness.

"... we were defeating our own purpose, that of perpetuating Man as a species. You are our salvation—you and others like you. You are the first. It is not too late—it is *not* too late!"

The speaker's voice rose on the last two words; not loud, yet loud enough to be caught up and echoed. "Too late—too—late—too la-aa-ate!" rang the walls.

I felt my very soul shrivel as my mind acknowledged fully the turned tables—the true lateness.

Then the caves were filled with a wild, blood-chilling sound, a horrendous discordance that reverberated and rollicked through the caves like the mad giggling of a thousand demons.

It was my own laughter.

THE GIRL WHO WAS GOD

by **NEWEL BIXBY**

SHE was 22 the first time, and newly from the farm. It was really an accident on her part, the first time. She was still emotionally upset from the trouble which had brought her to the city to hide, like a rabbit which hunts the deepest, most tangled thickets when it hears the baying of dogs.

It was not that she had ever encouraged Charlie Baywater. She hadn't, pointedly. He was, after all, over 50, miserly in spite of his broad land and houses in town and bank accounts, and remarkably resembling the pigs he raised. And she was, even in her small, dark, wavering mirror, her light hair skinned back out of the way, very pretty indeed.

She had been killing chickens. She still had the broad, red dripping knife in her hand when Charlie's truck stopped in the barn yard. Her ma was across county tending a woman in childbed. Pa and her brothers were in the far field. Charlie filled the shed door, coming at her. She screamed once, knowing it wouldn't help, and then, at last, remembered the knife half hidden in her skirts.

Before midnight she was on the highway, her few clothes tied in an empty sugar sack. Though the doctor had gotten there in time, she knew it would be wise to leave. Charlie was a vengeful man. But there had been a moment when he lay on the ground, that she had been almost—but not quite—relieved. She had sensed, even in her panic, that the act was incomplete.

Yet—the *first* time was an accident. She was still reveling in her job at the diner evenings, which let her lie abed until noon, streets which stayed lit until past midnight, and all the luxuries which even a little money brought her. She was, truly, a modern Cinderella with a dime store kingdom.

But she did not have the inborn wisdom of a city girl who, especially in that section of town, pulled down the shades at night. After all, for 22 years the only prowlers outside her window had been cats and, occasionally, a cow that strayed from the pasture.

And so it was that shortly before one dawn she awakened to feel hands at her throat and a knee gouging into her stomach. She had peeled and eaten an apple just before she'd turned out the light, and her frantic grasp found the knife she was able to use in time.

It was only a few minutes before the police came. She stopped sobbing to answer their hurried questions, and in a little she was alone again. But there had been a moment, before the others came, when she had felt exactly like God, to deal in life and death.

That had been five years ago. And the first time had been an accident. She'd changed jobs and moved to another section of town very shortly after that. A few months later she'd moved again. She had done it several times since, often to new towns, and changed her name twice. Her hair was no longer light. But her life was now perfect and complete.

The big Greyhound pulled into the depot. She put her lipstick back into her purse, smiled meaninglessly at the pudgy little man who got her bag from the rack for her, nodded at the driver who held her arm as she stepped down, and looked around for a magazine stand. She bought a local paper and turned to the 'Rooms for Rent' ads. She was quite experienced by now and soon checked three possible ads, asked directions, and began walking.

The first room was really completely unsuitable, but the second held promise. It was directly above a small restaurant whose fetid odors guaranteed that the food would be inedible. Furthermore, the room door had a cheap, tinny lock, the window screen was loose, and directly in front of it was the last landing of a shaky fire escape. On the side-

walk below, three or four squalid men sprawled, the empty bottle in front of them rolling, stopping, then rolling slowly again toward the gutter. The street was littered with last week's newspapers and scraps of garbage. It was exactly the location, the room, she needed. She gave the proprietress two weeks' rent in advance, cleaned up, and found herself a job.

For a month she was careful. She knew that it would be much simpler if the landlady could testify to her quiet behavior, and her current employer would say she was a willing and good worker. Having them on her side made the unpleasant part of it that much less unpleasant—later.

And then, one moonless midnight, she knew that it was time again. All the way home, four dark and lonely blocks, her heart danced inside her. Tonight, again, she would be fulfilled . . .

She swung onto her block, her dress rustling gaily around her. Half-way down the block was a small bar, with a cloudy, fly-specked window. She uncorked the small vial of perfume in her purse and daubed it on her wrists, neck and hair. Then she went through the door. She had two drinks, slowly, laughing, her face brightly flushed with anticipation and the joy of life. Everyone watched her.

She paid the bartender and her skirts flirted behind her as she left. She strolled leisurely, confident that someone had followed her out of the bar. Then—quickly, quickly up the stairs. Slowly, surely follow the pattern.

She let herself into her room, turned on the light, and pulled the shade exactly halfway down. Humming a little, she took off her dress, brushed her hair, and creamed her face. Was that—? Yes! There were the faintest of scraping sounds on the metal outside. She waltzed across the room, her face radiant. Slowly, methodically, she finished undressing. Was it only imagination, or? No. She really could hear breathing from beyond the screen. She raised her pillow to get the wisp of yellow nylon beneath it. Under *that*, and out of sight of the window, was a quite long, and very sharp knife. As she slid the transparent cloth over her head there was a slight shifting movement outside, so very small that she would never have heard it at all, except that she was listening so intently. It was going to be perfect this time—simply perfect!

Still humming, she turned out the light, slipped between the sheets, and closed her eyes. Her hand went under the pillow, and patiently, she began to wait. After all, she had plenty of time. Plenty of time because soon she would be God again, to deal in life and death. ●

HAVEN FOR THE DAMNED

by **ROBERT CASSIDAY**

THERE was a house on the hill, but no one visited there. Lewis came into the village and stayed there for a week before he even knew about the house; the natives did not mention it. He first saw it late in the afternoon as he was walking along the single highway that led out of the town, and the spark of curiosity it kindled in his mind was quickly dimmed.

It stood alone, on the peak of the hill outside the town. It was a great gingerbread construction, almost like a Victorian mansion, and it looked startlingly out of place in the Arizona landscape. As Lewis watched, a light went on in an upstairs room, a single eye staring out over the dry waste of the surrounding country. The light was that of a candle or a battery of candles; it flickered and went out and, after a second, returned. That was all.

In that first minute, Lewis felt curious enough about the house to think of walking over to the hill and up the hill to ring the doorbell. He invented excuses for doing so—a newcomer, who had lost his way; or, perhaps, some fine tale about “local color” for a book or a story or a painting. But, in the end, he remembered why he was in Arizona. The walk would simply be too tiring, he decided, and he turned back toward town.

Once he looked back over his shoulder at the house. The single upstairs light still marked it, shining out on the growing gloom like an eye. Then he turned again and forgot about the house. It wasn't important.

Lewis had enough to concentrate on; building himself up again after a bout with his lungs required all his concentration. The house was just an oddity, and perhaps some day he would find out who lived there,

and why they used candles instead of good electric light, and why such a turreted and gabled monster had ever been built, in the first place, so far into the American Southwest.

But for now, it didn't matter.

It didn't matter at all.

The boy who brought up his meals was a cheerful redhead with a dark complexion, a youngster named Bob something-or-other. It was two days after Lewis' first sight of the house outside of town when Bob vanished.

The girl who knocked on his door said her name was Doris, and put down the tray containing Lewis' lunch. She had red hair, too, braided down her back. "You must be Bob's sister," Lewis said.

Doris said: That's right," and turned to go.

"What's wrong with Bob?" Lewis said. "He isn't sick or anything, is he?"

"Sick?" Doris said. "No. Not exactly." She went to the door and opened it.

She didn't want to talk to him; that was obvious. But the small mystery of Bob's disappearance interested Lewis, and he had very little to occupy his days. "He didn't get himself into any kind of trouble?" he said.

"Nothing like that," Doris said. She turned and said: "He won't be back, though," and for the first time Lewis noticed that she had been crying. He had been sitting on the bed in his room; he swung off it and onto his feet, and met her at the door before she could move.

"Something's wrong," he said. "Can I help? I'd like to help."

She looked at him without saying a word. What was in her eyes? Fear or shame or just an unwillingness to talk to a stranger? Or—

Of course that was ridiculous. There was no need for Doris to be frightened of him. He was fully eight years older than her seventeen or so, and he was ill besides. He told her that.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said; there was little life in her voice, but the ghost of laughter crept through.

"Then why not tell me?" Lewis said. "Whatever happened to Bob—maybe I can help. It'll do you good to talk about it, anyhow."

"Good?" Doris stared. "It won't do anybody any good," she said. "There's nothing that can be done about it, Mister. That's all."

"But you—"

She was gone, twisting out of his weak grasp with a single motion, and shutting the door quickly behind her.

Lewis stared at the door for a long time before he went back to his seat on the bed, and the lunch Doris had left. He ate slowly, without thinking about his food.

A mystery . . .

Whatever had happened to Bob, Lewis felt very little emotion about it. The boy was, after all, a stranger. Beyond the few brief conversations they'd had when he had brought Lewis' meals, there was no contact between them; he neither liked nor disliked the red-haired boy. The problem was, Lewis told himself, purely an intellectual one, an occupation for a bored mind, a therapy for the final time of his healing.

So at first he thought of death. But if Bob had died suddenly, in some sort of accident, he did not think Bob's sister would be so reticent in her grief. These were not the close-mouthed sons of New England, with their inherent mistrust of any stranger. There was something more open about the Arizona village; Doris' reticence had to have a special and unusual cause.

Not illness, she had said, and no "trouble." Nor, he thought, death. Which left—what?

The problem was an interesting one. It didn't solve itself immediately; he could occupy himself with it for a long time, turning it this way and that, considering various possibilities and solutions.

The afternoon passed surprisingly quickly, and before Lewis realized it, it was time for his daily walk. But this time the walk had a purpose.

The official center of the village was the single building of white stucco which stood alone in the square. Without knowing precisely what he was going to do when he arrived there, Lewis headed for it immediately. When he pushed open the dark-wood swinging doors it was a few minutes before five, and one of the workers was coming out. They collided in the doorway, and Lewis stepped back onto the grass.

He had hardly caught his breath when a hand held him by the shoulder. "Listen, Mister," a rough voice said, "why don't you watch where the hell you're going?"

"I was—

"You were bumping me around, Mister," the voice said. Lewis looked up into the square face of the tallest man he had ever seen. "And I don't stand for it."

"I didn't see you," Lewis said. "It seems to me the fault must be as much yours as—"

"Don't give me backtalk," the giant said. He gave Lewis a push that nearly sent him sprawling. "Coming to see the Sheriff, Mister?" he said.

"Well, I—"

"In case you are," the giant said, "you're seeing him now. Stranger in town, aren't you, Mister?"

"I'm staying at the hotel while I—"

"Hotel?" The giant stepped back now. "You the sick man? The man who's resting up for his health?"

Lewis nodded.

"I'm damned," the giant said reflectively. "Shouldn't have been pushing you around—hell, you're sick. You're not responsible. Didn't do you an injury, did I?"

Lewis shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm all right. But I—"

"Well, then," the giant said, "bygones being bygones and all of that—what did you want to see me about?"

The sheriff, Lewis suddenly realized, would do as well as anyone else. Perhaps he knew something about the little mystery with which he had been amusing himself. Perhaps he would be able to clear matters up.

But did he want matters cleared up? The mystery had become a sort of game to him. He hardly wanted the game to end so soon.

Yet he had to say something and, in the end, he found himself saying: "It's about Bob—the boy at the hotel."

He had expected any one of many reactions. But the one he received was new and startling; the sheriff stared, swallowed and gave forth with a great guffaw. He rubbed one hand over the polished baldness of his scalp and seemed to study Lewis for a long minute. Then he said: "Got guts, haven't you, boy?"

"Guts?"

"Not many asking around about that," the sheriff said. "Not many care to know anything about it."

"About Bob?" But Lewis had the uneasy feeling that he and the sheriff were talking about two different worlds.

"Bob . . . that's neither here nor there," the sheriff said. "What he did, exactly, nobody's ever going to know now. Maybe they just needed food."

Food?

The game was over, now. This was very serious; Lewis said: "I don't understand you."

The sheriff looked him over again, this time with a cold and appraising glance. Apparently he liked what he saw, and after a second he nodded his head. "My name's Jim Coll," he said. "Let's you and I go someplace and talk this over. You might be just the person this place needs."

"Needs?" Lewis said. Then he added: "I'm Lewis Strand," and followed the sheriff down the path to a black sedan parked at the curb.

They sat in the car, without driving anywhere, and the sheriff talked. At first Lewis didn't believe what he was hearing. Then, later, when he had to believe it, he began to feel frightened.

And then terror replaced simple fright, and he wanted to run and hide, he wanted to leave and never come back, and he had to go on listening to the story that Jim Coll told him, the story that had to be true and wasn't like anything Lewis had ever heard before . . .

When had the house been built? "Oh, maybe about 1870," Coll said reflectively. "Before my time, anyhow, and a man named Gainger lived in it. Old man, moved out here in the first settlement days and wanted the house, I guess, to remind him of home. Nothing wrong with old man Gainger, until he died."

"Until he died?"

Coll nodded slowly. "After that—Gainger was buried right next to the house, by the way, according to stipulation of his will—the place stood vacant a while. I hear some girls took it over once, ran it as a bawdy house. But that's all gone now. What concerns you and me is Diedrich, Wilson Diedrich. He bought the place 20 or 30 years back. We don't talk about him much."

The day was cooling into evening. Lewis shifted in his seat, there in the black car. "What does Diedrich and the other have to do with—with Bob?" he said.

"Let me tell this my way," Coll said. "All right?"

"All right."

Coll settled back. "Now," he said, "you got to understand that I wasn't Sheriff then. If I had been, maybe things would be different—maybe not. I don't give myself bouquets. But Diedrich got into some kind of argument with a man who ran a local store. Over a couple of small items on the bill; he'd been here three-four months at that time. And Diedrich said he'd send his friend down to take care of the storeman."

"Friend?"

"Diedrich didn't have a friend, not as far as we knew. He was a new-comer. We talked to him, made him welcome, I suppose—but a friend, to take care of a man who'd been here for years? I guess nobody thought anything much of it, but it was a little queer. And one day the storeman—his name was Murphy—disappeared. Just up and vanished. Naturally, the people hereabouts were after Diedrich, and they came

storming up the hill like a posse. But they never reached the top. Diedrich sent his friend out after them."

Now Lewis felt some uneasiness. "Wait a minute," he said.

"His friend," Coll said. "Old Gainger."

"But Gainger was dead—"

"Gainger was dead," Coll said. "And maybe Gainger was restless, or not at peace somehow; miles away from what he still thought of as home. He never thought of this part of the country as home—that house he built proves it. And maybe the house itself wasn't enough to let him really rest. But this is all just my own idea."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Diedrich found some way to work on that unrest—and to raise old Gainger again. But what came out of the grave wasn't a harmless old man."

Lewis stared. "That's ridiculous."

"Okay," Coll said easily. "It's ridiculous. Me, and the people hereabouts—we've lived with it. We know it. And we need help."

"You mean Diedrich still threatens—"

"No." Coll shook his head very slowly. "Diedrich don't threaten any more. There's no call for that, don't you see? We *know*. And when someone—goes, we know he injured Diedrich in some way. Or else Diedrich just needed him."

"But it's horrible—"

"What do you want us to do?" Coll said. "Complain to the government? Tell the Governor, or the FBI, that we've got a ghoul here? They'd think we were all balmy."

And then there was a long silence.

And Lewis said: "A ghoul?"

Coll nodded, and the worst thing was the terrible calm with which he then spoke. He said: "Gainger—or what's left of Gainger. He eats people."

Darkness.

Coll sat at ease in the black sedan, and Lewis sat next to him. The game, the mystery, had turned into—something else. Something horrible. "What could I do?" he said. "Everybody else—the people who live here—"

"Scared," Coll said. "Scared out of their wits. I've tried to find somebody to help me. And you came along with your questions—listen, Strand, you're a newcomer. We can take care of Gainger and Diedrich, but it'll take both of us."

"But I—"

"Made the plans long ago," Coll said. "I was born here, brought up right in this town. Alone, no man could do the job. But two men working together . . ."

Lewis opened the car door. "I'm not the man you—"

"You're sick," Coll said. "That won't matter. Believe me. That won't matter. And you've got to help me."

Lewis said: "How?"

Coll explained. When he was finished Lewis said: "Right up to the house? Where—where they live?"

"Or whatever it is they do, Diedrich and his friend," Coll said. "That's right. It's got to be done, Mr. Strand."

"I can't—"

"Diedrich has kept this town in the palm of his hand," Coll said. "He's got a friend. What he calls his friend. Power . . . listen, Mr. Strand. I can beat him. But I need a friend too. And you've got to be that friend. You're new. You're not scared and beaten down over years . . ."

"Listen, Mr. Coll," said. "I came here to recuperate from—"

"That won't make any difference," Coll said impatiently. "Think about Bob for a minute. Maybe it's too late for Bob. But there'll be others. There'll always be others. They've got to be saved."

"I—"

"You've got to do it," Coll said. "That's all. You've got to."

Lewis said: "When?"

"Now," Coll said. "Now." In the light of a single streetlamp his face shone with eagerness, with a sudden surge of strength. He was the biggest man Lewis had ever seen. He could fight—anyone.

Anyone human.

But the thing on the hill wasn't human any more. This wasn't a game. Diedrich and his friend—Diedrich and the long-dead Gainger . . .

He eats people.

Lewis shuddered.

"I've got everything right in the car," Coll said. "I've carried it in the car—waiting. But we don't get visitors, we don't get stopovers, not the right kind. Old men, wives and children . . ."

"I couldn't do it. I—"

"You'll do it," Coll said. "You'll do it." He reached over and started the car; the roar of the motor split the silence with a shock, and the car turned round and sped up the highway. Lewis sat stiffly in his seat.

He eats people.

The house was a solid block of blackness in the night. There were no

candles glowing now, and the roar of the car, as they drove up, seemed to Lewis horribly loud. But there was no disturbance. When the car stopped, Coll handed Lewis the equipment he was going to need, and went to the door. He knocked on it heavily, two great blows.

There was no answer.

But Coll shouted: "Diedrich? Diedrich?"

A voice said: "Yes, Mr. Coll?"

It was distant and hollow, a high, thin funnel of a voice.

"I've come to see you," Coll said.

Lewis stood next to the giant. His knees were trembling. How had he agreed to this insane venture?

But, of course, he *hadn't* agreed . . .

It was simply impossible to back out.

"What about?" said the hollow voice far away.

"Open the door," Coll said, "and I'll tell you. I take no stock in this shouting."

The laugh from inside the house was almost amused. "That's right," the hollow voice said, "you've never really—believed, have you? You've never seen that there was nothing you could do about me, and my friend. That's rather funny, in a way . . . you know, Coll, I rather like you. That's the reason my friend has never visited you."

"There are other reasons," the giant said sharply.

"Do you mean to think I'm afraid of you?" said the hollow voice. The laugh came again, and the door opened slowly, without noise.

Inside the house was dark. After a second Lewis saw a shape. Diedrich.

He wanted to run, but he could not move. Coll said: "All right, then. That's better."

He stepped inside and lit a match in one motion. The shape by the door leaped out in sudden clarity and Lewis nearly screamed.

This was not Diedrich.

Flesh hung in rags from a half-naked body, stooped and bent and old. The face was staring, blank, mottled blue; where there should have been a nose there was only a black pit.

This was not Diedrich, but his friend.

Gainger—restless, hungry . . . dead.

From somewhere in the house the hollow voice called: "Come in, Coll. Come in."

Lewis slipped inside noiselessly, and the door shut. With that, Coll's match went out. They were alone in the dark with . . . with Gainger.

Coll screamed: "Now!" and ran. Lewis could see him heading up-

stairs, a shadow among shadows. But he had no time to waste. His job was to fight the—thing. He flung himself on it.

Then there were teeth and claws, hands that slid and slipped on his body, and a high thin mewling that was not human, that could never be human, and from upstairs a scream—whose?

Diedrich's?

Coll's?

No time to waste or to think. Lewis swung at the thing before him, and his fist met a pulpy mass that had been a face. His hand was wet when it came away, and a hand raked him across the cheek, sharp old nails drawing blood. He gasped and struggled and he heard another scream, upstairs, far away.

And another.

The thing did not breathe; it sucked air, sucked and sucked at him, scrabbled for his arms and caught them. Lewis broke free, panting, his lungs forgotten in the freezing terror of the fight. He *threw* the thing from him and heard it land wetly against a wall. He turned to the door and fumbled for the handle. He . . .

It scrabbled upward and mewled and came for him again, blank-eyed in dimness, its clawed hands reaching, making great arcs in the air, missing him—catching him alongside the jaw and making him stagger.

Then Diedrich's laugh rang out upstairs and Lewis fought like a madman, forgetting everything, rising to battle the undead thing that fought him, hitting the soft face, the ragged body again and again, again and again, driving it down . . .

There was flesh under his nails, rotting flesh, and blood too old for color on his hands, when the thing went down and he found the door and opened it.

Diedrich was coming down the stairs.

No time to waste . . .

He flung the container of gasoline out into the house, and flung a match after it, a candle he lit hurriedly, another match . . .

Blaze!

It caught and Lewis ran. Inside there were screams, howls . . .

Gibberings . . .

Silence.

Coll.

How long had he known the man?

On the way back to town in Coll's car, he thought about that, when he had finally stopped shaking for a little while. (But the shaking would return. The shaking would always return. He felt the dirt and horror of

the thing all through his body.)

Yet . . .

Lewis was a lonely man, a single man who traveled in his own way. Humanity was—what? A game? A mystery?

Yet he had a friend now. Coll was dead, as he must have foreseen, as he must have planned. Coll was lucky, his friend, and dead.

Lewis thought of the fight he could never forget and cursed himself for being alive. ●



VORTEX

by WILLIAM JUKES

DR. PHILIP SWETNIK, B.S., M.S., Ph.D., was in a quandary. The pile of papers tossed into a corner proved that. It was extremely important that he complete the careful calculations so precisely written upon them, but it was impossible to work while Honey was out—and it was almost equally impossible to work while she was in.

Honey just didn't seem to understand. No—rather it would be more accurate to say that she didn't *try* to understand. When he was immersed in a long and especially difficult equation, struggling toward the final solution, she'd snap on the radio and do her version of the cha-cha-cha or whatever it was called, drowning out his burgeoning idea and appealing for a little fun. However, the climax was reached when she left him alone. Then the figures on the paper became symbols of *her* figure and he wondered which man she was out with, in whose arms she was lying. He understood that her body and her proclivities were the same—catlike. Knowing that, any attempt at concentration was utterly useless.

Then, because he was inherently a neat man, he retrieved his papers from the corner, carefully stacked them, and once more tried to lose himself in them. He knew it would be a futile struggle, but he tried. It didn't work. Dr. Swetnick had known all along that it wouldn't. He hung his head in his hands to suffer the agonies of an original and imaginative mind.

Viewed objectively, he rather admired her. She had a perfect genius for attracting men who had wealth, virility and good looks. Accepting it as her due, she always maintained a string of them, discarding

from one end and adding to the other. Viewed subjectively, Honey was some very short, harsh, ugly words.

The worst of it, though, was his weakness regarding her. Every time he accosted her with her flagrant amours, she beguiled him with sex, believing it to be a panacea for every wrong, and it worked in his case. It was a horrible thing for Dr. Swetnik to admit to himself that she was gradually sapping his manhood. He never could quite figure out why she had married him—perhaps to give herself an air of respectability. His own reasons were obvious—she was so beautiful.

He was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he didn't hear her come in. Like the feline she was, she instinctively avoided any unnecessary noise. Only the slight tremor in the floor or perhaps her psychic aura betrayed her presence. He looked up:

"So you've finally come home—why?"

Honey stretched languidly and started undressing. "Don't tell me we're going to have another one," she purred lazily and unconcernedly.

"No," he answered. "I don't want an argument. I'd just like to find out why you do this to me."

"What?" she asked blankly, walking nude to the bathroom.

He followed her smooth-skinned, long-legged figure, gently swaying in perfect balance. "Please don't insult my intelligence," he pleaded. "You know perfectly well what I mean."

She ignored him and ran water into the tub, eliminating any possibility of a reply. He knew the worst then—she always took a bath after one of her infidelities. He couldn't help watching her softly rub her body with perfumed soap, caressing along the grain of the satiny skin, luxuriating in the abnormally hot water with half-closed eyes, the tendriling stream crinkling her blonde hair into tight curls. She was so awfully beautiful—so completely graceful—he was always reminded of a sinewy cat stretched before a fireplace gently licking its fur.

Dr. Swetnik recognized that a straightforward question and answer period would accomplish nothing with her—you had to be devious, so he tried a new tack.

"Honey, I perfectly realize that it's difficult for you to live in a one and a half room apartment. Undoubtedly you're bored. But you must appreciate my problems, too. I have to finish this research work—a matter of little less than a year. You know how important it is to me—and it's important to you, too, Honey. If I can success-

fully synthesize all the hormones and chemicals exuded by the ductless glands, I'll be a very wealthy man. If you want a twenty-room house, I'll buy it for you then—diamonds, furs, anything. But meanwhile, we must live within the limits of the grant. I'm asking your cooperation to aid me in this work so that both of us will have a very luxurious future. You must give me peace of mind."

Honey stood up in the bathtub, the water sliding off her skin, unconsciously ducking away from the shelf of chemicals, essential to the few experiments he performed away from the laboratory. Since their cramped quarters prevented him from putting them anywhere else, he had attached a strong shelf high over the bathtub as the logical solution. Both of them had learned to avoid it and were now hardly aware of its existence when bathing. Her head performed little airy patterns around it as she towelled herself, and after due consideration, she finally deigned to reply.

"Don't worry, Philip. You always accomplish whatever you set out to do. I have full confidence in you." She slipped into a nightgown and pulled the bed down from the living room wall. With consummate grace, she slid under the covers and curled along the mattress.

Dr. Swetnik hurriedly undressed, snapped off the lights and occupied his half of the bed. He lay there for awhile in silence, seriously thinking, then gradually edged over toward her, succumbing to his weakness again.

"Honey," he said, reaching out an arm to touch her. "I'm sorry I made you mad. You know I love you." He moved closer. "Honey! Honey!"

Her back arched away from him and her voice came half muffled through the pillow. "Go away, Philip. I'm tired. I want some sleep."

"You're tired—" he stormed, sitting up, leaning over her. "Well, I'm pretty tired of you giving away what is mine by right. It's coming to a halt, I'm warning you."

A heavy rhythmic breathing was his only answer.

By the next morning's breakfast, after a fitful night of fretting and frustrated fuming, he had reached a decision. Honey was taking small delicate nips out of her toast, staring out the window, seemingly preoccupied with other thoughts.

"Honey," he announced, "I want you to listen to me."

She slowly rolled her eyes toward him, but stared through him as though he were of translucent material and there was something much more interesting beyond.

He took the bull by the horns and tried to counteract her disinterested attitude by speaking louder. "It's obvious we can't go on like this. So you're going to have to change, and, I might add, change for the better. This is not a request. From now on, you're going to be a housewife and stay at home. The only time you'll go out is when I take you. When I come home this evening, dinner will be ready for me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Philip," she said and turned to stare out the window.

He slammed down the cup, coffee spurted out and dripped down the sides. He didn't know whether he had gotten through to her, but he had unequivocally stated his position and the consequences were here. He paused just once going out the door—

"Remember what I said. It was good advice. I haven't shown you the reverse side of the coin yet, but believe me, it's distinctly unpleasant. Do you hear me?"

She nodded like the Delphic oracle in reply to the imponderable.

The storm still raged inside him when he reached the laboratory, and again he found it impossible to work there. The most frustrating part of it was that he was losing valuable time and he was so close to the answers. But the grant he had received for the almost impossible task was limited and his home life was wrecking an invaluable product of genius. His fury was impotent, self-destructive—he had too much respect for the valuable equipment around him to batter his fists against it. To his assistants, he appeared outwardly composed, but he knew by their attitudes they suspected something was wrong. Finally he couldn't contain himself any longer and went out to the corridor to phone the house.

The bell rang and rang, but there was no answer at the other end. She was out again, enjoying herself, making a cuckold of him. "God!" he screamed his anger. "She burns me up." Then an awakening awareness, a germ of an idea, a sudden resolution flooded his face and he carefully replaced the receiver. The die was cast—it was her turn to suffer. And suffer she would—the punishment would fit the crime.

He returned to his desk, active and alert. His mental processes now had a focal point and he contemplated the retribution with a good deal of enjoyment. Pulling pencil and paper close, he started plotting with scientific exactitude. An hour's figuring gave him the answers he desired and he returned to his own work refreshed, expurgating his personal problems from his mind.

Honey wasn't home that evening. Dr. Swetnik didn't expect her

to be. Dinner wasn't ready, of course, but that was of no moment. He wasn't hungry. And he had quite a bit to accomplish before he welcomed her to their domicile. He whistled tunelessly as he unpacked the heavy suitcase he had brought from the laboratory. An odd assortment came out of it.

He worked steadily for an hour at an occupation that was unusual for him. But he brought to it a mind that was trained in scientific preciseness. His pursed lips tunelessly whistled one of those classical selections of music that Honey so hated. Dr. Swetnik took a grim pleasure in the realization that he was actually enjoying his work, and would enjoy the consequences even more. He finished and took a last look around. Everything was satisfactory—it had to be to please his painstaking nature.

Then he sat in the living room and patiently waited for Honey, his mind witnessing every movement of her latest infidelity. She probably was enjoying herself more than she ever had with him. "Stop it!" his brain screamed. "This path leads to insanity." So he sat and waited, deliberately stifling all thought, a blank blob of meat.

Honey came home. The lock hardly clicked under her soft touch as she insinuated herself inside the door. She had padded halfway across the living room before her nocturnal eyes discovered him sitting in the dark.

"Oh," she said. "Are you here?"

"Yes," he said, "I'm here. Where did you expect me to be? This is our home."

"I thought," she shrugged, "you might still be at that dreary laboratory, working away."

"Working away for you," he amended. "But I came home—to see if you had listened to my warnings this morning. You didn't."

"That's obvious," she smiled that slow insouciant smile at him. "I got bored. As a matter of fact, Philip, I'm bored with you. Now after I take a bath, I'm going to leave you. Don't argue, I'm being very considerate. You're really better off without me."

"All right," he said, watching her slide her clothes off and with soft palms massage away from her body the marks of her underwear. "You always take a bath—afterwards. It must be a symbolical cleansing for you."

Honey shook her blonde hair free. "Let's not discuss it. I'll be out of your life in an hour. I like to take a bath in private, so leave me alone, Philip."

"I will. But just answer me one question. Why do you do this to me?"

"I don't know," she said calmly as she stepped into the tub and seated herself. "But I have a burning in my body for almost any man but you. Now go away and shut the door behind you."

Honey reached for the soap. It seemed stuck to the perforated steel dish that held it, so she yanked. Her eyes opened in amazement as paint-camouflaged string twanged away from the wall. She looked up in time to see the string pull away the wooden crosspiece that jutted out of the wall and supported the shelf over the bath tub. The shelf was hinged and collapsed. She screamed in horror as beakers tumbled over, their glass stoppers falling out, cascading fuming acid down onto her.

Dr. Swetnik heard her last despairing cry. He also heard a quick floundering movement, then only moans and a horrid sizzling sound. Finally the moans stopped.

"What a terrible accident," he thought. "I'll have to notify the police—after I remove some of the evidence."

Over and over, a sentence kept repeating itself in his brain. He had to remind himself constantly that he couldn't say it out loud to the police. But that didn't mean there wasn't enjoyment mumbling it silently: "There goes another wife down the drain." ●



If I Die Before I Wake

by **PETER GUND**

Today is blue and gold—a swimming cloud
Curls up about the sun like a white wave,
Crossing the bathroom window mirrored now
In the misted glass that tells me where to shave.

Downstairs the radio gives us an account
Of the latest H-bomb test:
So many megatons of instant blazing pain
Or secret gamma rays that subtly gnaw the brain—
Such deft new ways of death.

It is a day to savor—fresh hot toast
With marmalade, hot coffee, and my wife
Across the table—surely here's the most
A man can lawfully demand of life.

The paper states New Flying Saucers Seen!
Can they have come from Mars?
Will we be slaves to weird new monsters that can creep
Upon us unawares and take us while we sleep
To serve in cosmic wars?

The sunny morning wraps me as I pace
Down to the bus stop, while the schoolward bound
Small fry rush past me, shouting as they race,
Their laughter spilling gaily all around.

This rampant youth, they tell us, sounds our knell;
Only doom lies ahead—
For soon the teeming earth will be a swarming hell
Of starving staggering savage mobs whose bodies swell
With hunger while their hearts shrivel with fear, who'd
sell
Their souls for moldy bread.

Man walks in a wonderful flowering world
Shut up in his shell of dread—
The mushroom cloud is etched in horror on his mind
And UFO's whirl madly round. The deadly wind
Of terror—fatal germ or rampant star or cosmic fiend—
All there before, but mercifully unknown—
Blows through the universe opening around him on every hand.
Through secret doors that one by one swing wide before him
All his puny heart can find
Is fear.

THE STRANGE PAINTINGS OF FELIX A. ORTH

by JOHN JAKES

The Angel chained to invisible walls watches the world through his moving window. I did love the Earth and its people, he thinks impotently. I did love them but now I have done this.

He strains against the barriers he cannot see, knowing there is no escape. And beyond the window the Beasties frolic through the land, their soft-boiled-egg eyes full of mirth, and upon the face of the world blood stands like pools of fallen rain. . . .

THE young man hurried down the street, holding his paintings tightly under one arm. Overhead the clouds were patterns of black and white, interlaced with gray. The wind smelled fresh, like an approaching storm.

It is wonderful, thought the young man as he walked. The sights and smells and sounds of Earth are magnificent. I must capture them

on my canvas and show them to others.

He reminded himself mentally that he had already captured them, or so he thought. Now there remained only the task of showing these impressions to the public. That was why he carried the paintings with such infinite care. What if his family had wanted him to study science, specialize in Multiple Dimension Study? Science was cold and pale beside art. It was all right to dabble in it as he did, fiddling with bizarre gadgets; it was a hobby. But a life's work? Never. In one of his violent bursts of emotion, the young man had decided the matter long before.

His paintings had to be accepted! Within him scorched the desire to communicate deep feelings with other men; to express and share his thoughts. And now, as he hurried under a leaden sky, along the dim iron canyon that smelled of rain, he realized that he was approaching the first critical test of his work. He would know, after long months of careful preparation, whether his painting was good or bad.

Quickening his pace, he made his way up the broad stone steps and into the ornate gold-sprinkled entrance of the Archbroker Galleries. His canvases were held more tightly than ever under the arm of his worn and faded suitcoat.

He became painfully aware of his clicking footsteps in the quiet marble reception hall. The place seemed immense, full of indirect lighting, money, and a musty classic air.

The young girl at the desk glanced up, faint contempt for his kind seeping from behind her gold-crusted shell rim glasses.

"Yes?"

"I . . . I have an appointment with Mr. Archbroker. To show him some paintings." And, he finished hopefully to himself, to perhaps sell him one or two for exhibition in the gallery.

"What is your name please?" she said mechanically.

"Orth. Felix A. Orth. A for Angelo."

"Oh," she mocked, "A for Angelo. Is that right! I'll see if Mr. Archbroker is in."

Gerald Archbroker clicked down the cam on the sound box. Leaning back in his lime green armchair, he surveyed his large immaculate desk and reached for a cigarette. Let the young fool wait a bit. Think I'm busy.

Gerald Archbroker was immensely pleased with himself. He took great delight in discouraging new artistic talent, and this one, what was his name?—Orth? might offer particularly virgin territory.

Gerald Archbroker let the smoke trail from his flaring nostrils,

contemplating the coming sport. Once he had burned with the desire to paint; the wish to spread magnificent canvases before the eyes of the world. Then he had learned that he had absolutely no talent, and from several leading authorities in the field to boot.

But Gerald Archbroker had been a wealthy young man, thanks to dear mother. With his fortune he had built his gallery, and with that same money he had made himself artistic dictator of the city. Once established, he turned his talents to making up for his original lack of skill by squelching it wherever it displayed itself in young artists. This he did behind the benevolent post of a helpful patriarch to struggling newcomers. He knew that he was not a very nice person, but he enjoyed himself.

He paused, inhaled his cigarette once more, and opened the cam on the sound box.

"You may send Mr. Orth in now."

"Yes, sir."

Running a hand over his immaculate bald scalp and adjusting his immaculate peace-colored ascot, he waited.

Orth entered with jerky movements, quivering faintly in awe of the luxurious office. Introducing himself in short gasps, he responded to Archbroker's wave and spread his three paintings on an easel under a blue haze of fluorescent light: a seascape, a study of the city at night, and a portrait of an old woman in a delicatessen, all in oil. Stepping away, he pulled once at his thinning dark hair and held his breath.

"Ummmm," said Archbroker, trying to convey great meaning as he surveyed the works from several different angles. "You like to paint, do you, Mr. Orth?"

"It's my life, sir," answered Felix melodramatically.

"Well, well," Archbroker commented. Oh, he must have time to think on this one. Here was a boy with talent; real talent, not just piddling stabs at art . . . such as he himself had made. Flashes of colorful brilliance, delicate contour of line. Oh, this one would be most pleasant to squelch.

"I suppose," he said at last, avoiding Orth's gaze, "you want me to buy one of these?"

Felix gasped. "Why . . . why, yes, sir, but . . ."

Archbroker hardened his voice. "Can you stand the critical truth about your work?"

"Of course," replied Felix, frowning.

"It's bad. Abominably bad. You can put shapes on canvas. Colors, too. But the subjects!" His tone was an upraised hand, a flaring vocal

gesture. "They're out of date! Trite! Overworked! My boy, if you ever want to be a great artist, be original. Get new concepts, bold outlooks, daring subject matter!"

"Those . . . aren't any good?" responded Felix weakly. Why did he always act so spineless, Archbroker wondered? He looked like the type who would think of barbed phrases to hurl in defense of his work, when he was alone.

"*They . . . are . . . terrible.*" Archbroker spoke with measured force. Felix was already collecting his paintings, wrapping them up, even as he listened to the man's voice. "Go seek new fields, new vistas for the imagination. Then come back and see me. You must learn that there is no room in the world of art for out-dated garbage!"

But Felix (A for Angelo, but certainly not for Artist) Orth was gone from the room. With a little sigh, Archbroker returned to his desk. That last about garbage had been a neat thrust, cutting just enough. And he had asked the young man to return. One more time and his ambitions would be nearly dead.

Unless, of course, the young man did find some daring new subjects to paint. He admittedly had talent.

Even if he should find such subjects, thought the great god of the gallery, I think I can take care of him.

And it will be such fun!

Striding home through the twilight, Felix writhed with hatred. Damn Archbroker! Damn him and his critical soul! He had wanted a sound opinion, but to be reviled like that! Garbage!

He spat noisily into the gutter. The clouds still hovered, seeming to hold their rain and swell in preparation for a torrential outpouring.

The very faces, the sounds and smells Orth had enjoyed earlier now were vile and ugly. The people on the streets, unable to recognize his true worth. Murkily, he knew that he should not damn all humanity for one man's sake, but his peculiar tempermental nature made it easy. The world was against him. The filthy damnable world.

This feeling of periodic hate was a frequent occurrence amid his enjoyment of living. They were dangerous periods. For should he be driven too far. . . .

But Felix only thought this dimly as he stormed into his flat and switched on the light. The room was cluttered with rags, tubes of oils, brushes, an easel, old canvases, and various pieces of twisted machinery used in his sparetime scientific dabbling. Now the nude lightbulb seemed to bathe the room in a blue fluorescent haze, and from the bulb itself, as if from the center of the universe, radiated the benevolent, cynical

countenance of Gerald Archbroker.

"You go to hell," growled Felix, leering at the lightbulb.

He needed something to calm him, to soothe his shrieking sensibilities. He began tinkering absently with one of his gadgets, a mad device for opening ways into other planes of existence. His early work in Multiple Dimension Study had been on rather abstract terms, but his assembling of the machine was on no terms at all. It was the flashing, rattling construction of a man who makes a new discovery purely by chance after long periods of failure; the one right combination of working parts which results, to the experimenter's amazement, in a device which he had come to accept as impossible.

Wants new vistas, does he, Felix thought as he worked. New fields of imagination, eh? Isn't satisfied with Earth, is he? Well, I'll satisfy him, by God. I'll dream up something that'll make Dali look like a kindergarten scribbler. Slap the paints on the canvas! That'll satisfy them, Archbroker the god of art and all the stupid unappreciative people in the whole rotten world!

All the while, his hands jumped and darted over the machinery, jamming coils in place, connecting relays, attaching and calibrating dials.

Wants something different, does he? Well, I'll find it. *I'll find it!*

Suddenly he stopped working and realized that he had already found it.

Hovering in the middle of the room and obscuring a portion of the opposite wall was a rectangular shape filled with the weirdest landscape Felix A. Orth had ever seen.

The perspective was all wrong. The vegetation, if it was that, grew in hideous formations. But the whole scene looked queerly real. It had three-dimensionality, or better, Felix thought, ultra-dimensionality.

This, Felix knew with keen insight, was another plane of existence. His studies had proven the theory of such planes entirely valid. But the possibility of ever looking at one . . .

He walked around behind the suspended view. From that position there was nothing to be seen. Nothing broke the sight of his own room.

Frightened, he rushed back to the first vantage point. The thing . . . the window . . . the picture . . . of another dimension was still there.

The . . . *picture!*

Almost not daring to think, he shifted first one, then another dial, gambling vaguely on a chance. The picture did not vanish. It merely blurred and a new scene appeared, twice as bizarre as the first.

New? Challenging? By God, this was it!

He yanked his easel hastily into place and smeared fresh paint on

his palette. The brush leaped in his hand, almost as the parts of the machine had, but this time his work was controlled, with only occasional pauses to shift the scene which he had finished copying.

By midnight he had completed an assortment of the strangest pictures any Earthman had ever conceived. Once or twice he had thought he detected stirrings of movement among the tipsy trees of that alien world, but he wrote it off to exhaustion, both mental and physical.

He undressed confidently after cleaning his brushes. He switched off the light and climbed into bed. The light no longer leered like Gerald Archbroker.

His anger had passed, but he did feel that he had accomplished a great deal. If present-day art demanded new imaginative concepts, he had them. As he lay in the dark, he watched to where the window would be. He couldn't see it, but he knew it was there.

He ate no breakfast the following morning, pacing his room and smiling first at the paintings and then at the dimensional window. His eyes must be overworked. There were still those faint suggestions of hopping movement. Oh well . . .

Promptly at nine he called the gallery.

"Yes?" said the young woman frigidly.

"This is Felix A. Orth."

"An A for Angelo?" Her tone indicated that she knew about his far-from-triumphant interview.

He let it pass. "I want to see Mr. Archbroker at ten this morning."

"I'm extremely sorry but . . ."

"Tell him I'll kick the door down if he doesn't see me! And tell him I have his challenging new concepts. I have paintings with daring imagination! Tell him that, and tell him I'll be there in an hour!"

He slammed down the phone, not even waiting for a reply.

Wrapping his work for the second time in twenty-four hours, he locked the door of his flat securely. Not wise to have anyone in there snooping around his machine, and the window.

The clouds still held their rain. He didn't care. The world again smelled, looked, and felt wonderful. Archbroker couldn't help but recognize his talent now. No other painter on Earth, he ventured, had ever worked from such novel subject matter.

Felix A. (now undoubtedly for Artist) Orth felt supremely confident.

Archbroker, upon learning of Orth's violent phone call, had been somewhat agitated. Perhaps this one had an awareness of his little game. That had been at nine in the morning.

Now the solid silver hands of the small clock on the great man's desk pointed two minutes until ten, and Archbroker again felt sure of himself. Grouped around the room were four men, all bearing the stamp of the pseudo-intellectual like a heavy cross. They were the art critics of the city's leading newspapers, whom Archbroker had summoned in a moment of brilliant insight. They were his puppets; they groveled before the great man, willing to do anything for him since their salaries were paid not by the newspapers, but from his own pocket. Otherwise, they knew full well, their columns would not be in the papers at all, and they would be writing sex novels in some bohemian cellar. They were extensions of Archbroker's personality, but Orth would not know that. Ignorant artists—ignorant since they were unaware of the whole masquerade—would fear the critics, and Archbroker knew that Orth was no exception.

No one spoke as the silver hands edged to the hour. The door burst open and Orth stalked in, glowering.

"Here I am," he said inanely, full of righteous fire.

"Yes, certainly," the great man said with studied aplomb. "You know Mr. Hascomb, art critic of the Telegram? Mr. deVouges of the News, Mr. Pressberger of the Herald and Mr. Murchie of the World-Examiner? I called them here to witness your new-found talents."

Orth seemed cowed by the assemblage. Without another word he moved to the easels under the blue lights and arranged his work, as Archbroker commented dryly, "And your talents are certainly new-found. Discovered within the last day, I believe."

Orth gestured to the six *outré* canvases, still silent. Archbroker and the others surveyed them carefully.

"Mr. Orth," said the immaculate man with great solemnity, "do you take narcotics?"

Felix was stunned. "They're . . . new concepts. That's what's wanted, isn't it?"

Gerald Archbroker began to laugh. He let the laughter bubble up and up, fountains of mockery radiating from his pink skull and his pale gold ascot. His face became pink as his scalp as he was enveloped in convulsions of mirth, sardonic, biting and contemptuous.

And like robots responding to the action of a master, the Messrs. Hascomb, deVouges, Pressberger and Murchie began to laugh also, exactly as Gerald Archbroker was laughing. The tide of mockery rose and was thundering.

"What rot," Archbroker blubbered through his laughter, as tears

rolled down his immaculate cheeks. "What insane rot. Young man . . . young man. . . ." He paused to let a particularly hilarious burst come forth. "You should be locked. . . ." Another burst. "Locked up in a madhouse. . . ."

The jeering noise obscured any further comment. The laughter was intolerable. Felix collected his work, face a pale mask of dumbness. Louder and louder echoed the laughter. With only one canvas wrapped, Felix ran from the room and the horrible noise of the laughter.

His brain was on fire when he reached the street. He did not even notice that the clouds had broken at last and were loosing a flood of rain upon the pavement. He pushed by pedestrians scurrying for cover, oblivious to the water streaming down his face.

He threw his painting into a trash can on the corner, down among the garbage where it belonged. He hated Archbroker and the world more than ever. He didn't dare give his emotions free rein. He might lash out and injure someone.

When he arrived at his flat, dripping, he sat on his cot, broken and full of loathing. If he only had a chance! A chance to make the stupid fools suffer as he was suffering!

"Hello," chirruped something.

Orth looked up, then pawed his eyes.

"We can't see you, but we sense you are there," came the voice again.

It was from the dimensional window. There amid the queer landscape, tiny creatures were materializing from among the foliage. Those must be the flashes of movement I detected, he thought.

They were very small, and white like the underside of a fish. Their eyes were bloodshot soft-boiled-eggs, protruding from their heads. Little sucking mouths made their speech, and several white gooey-looking tentacles waved in all directions.

"Who . . . who are you?" asked Orth, wondering if he should be locked up as Archbroker had suggested.

"We live here," said one of them, the leader of the group who had spoken before. "You can call us the Beasties. We don't like people."

"Neither do I," Orth muttered darkly.

"We know that. We're rather telepathic. As I say, we can't exactly see you, but we know you're looking at us. They won't let you paint, will they? They don't like you, do they?"

"No, damn them, they don't."

"We would like you. I think you would be very happy here, where we could watch you paint, and approve."

A monstrous thought was being born within Felix, spawned during

one of his vengeful periods when nothing was too wild for him to conceive in his anger at humanity.

"Why don't you come here and live with us?" the Beasties chirruped, and all the others jumped up and down excitedly, their big eyes joggling. Orth did not look closely, but he thought he saw, for only an instant, unpleasant depths in their humor. They were soon forgotten, if they existed at all.

"Could I?" he breathed. "Could I be rid of this whole filthy planet? You may not be human, but . . . would you like my work?"

"Of course," came a chorus of shrill pipings.

He stood up resolutely. "How do I come through?"

"Just step through and bring your machine with you." The Beastie added after a minute, "and art materials."

As he gathered his things, Orth was struck by the monumental irony of the joke he was about to play. Entering a plane of existence where the alien inhabitants liked his work, while his own Earth brothers, mocking at the actuality of such planes, scorned him. If they only knew . . . But he knew. That was satisfactory.

The transport was easily accomplished. A faint tingling sensation through his body, a blurring of accurate sense perception, and he was in the middle of a bizarre world that stretched away in every direction.

"What is your name?" one of the Beasties exclaimed. All of them seemed to hang back a little from his body.

"Orth. Felix A. Orth. A for Angelo."

"A for Angel!" they chorused. "We've studied your mind. We know what angels are. You're the angel!"

Orth did not notice that one of the Beasties had slipped what appeared to be a needle into his arm until he glanced down and saw one of them pulling it free.

"Now," squeaked the little creature, "you will require no food or sleep. You can paint all you want to. Come this way."

They led him across the land of jarring colors and twisted perspectives to a transparent cubicle suspended in the air.

"Step in," one of the Beasties chattered anxiously. "This is your studio. The studio of the Angel."

He did as they requested, not at all worried by the false impossibility of his situation. He was lost in the cosmic humor of his joke.

"Paint!" he heard the Beasties chirruping as they manipulated his machine which lay outside the walls of the cubicle. There seemed to be hundreds of them, thousands, and more were gathering, bounding over the landscape like rubber balls.

One of them adjusted the dimensional window and a picture appeared in the air. A street in his own city. There the people moved, dumbly unaware of the bulb eyes watching them avidly.

Orth laughed bitterly and set to work.

Time did not exist in that plane. He painted the street, and the Beasties chirruped their approval in mad squeals of delight. They would shift the scene and he would paint again, and once more the scene was changed. The process went on and on until his little cubicle was piled high with finished canvases, and he had no more on which to work. He felt uneasy, although he was not the least bit tired or hungry. The Beasties seemed to watch the window more than his paintings.

And his anger had slowly dwindled, as it always did, to be replaced by his love for Earth; his love of the sights and sounds and smells.

The leader of the Beasties approached the cubicle.

"It is time for us to leave, Angel."

"Leave? Leave for where?"

"For your Earth. We have grown tired of this world. Your Earth seems very pleasant. Thank you for showing it to us."

Orth rushed to the door of his cubicle. He fumbled with the walls, but he was sealed in.

"What do you want from Earth? What are you doing?" His shouts were confused.

"We Beasties move from dimensional plane to dimensional plane, living a while in each. We never stay in one place very long. Always we find someone to show us the next plane we will visit. We gave you mental directions in constructing your machine, although you did not know it at the time."

Orth slumped against the wall, weak and frightened. If only his stomach was full, so that he might vomit, throw off his sickness, his dawning horror.

The Beasties, now almost an endless mob, were stirring. Their eyes bulged excitedly as the leader adjusted the dials of the machine. The window became a moving scene, gradually changing like a camera panning. "You will be amused watching us," the leader stated.

"You only wanted me . . . for this?" Orth mumbled, feeling helpless and utterly incapable of action.

"Goodbye, Angel," chirruped the leader.

"Wait!" Orth shouted. "Don't leave me here!"

"Goodbye, Angel," came the leader's voice again.

"Tell the people of Earth to come for me! Tell them how to build windows!" Orth cried out, vainly grasping for sanity.

FEAR!

"We shall have to kill the people of Earth, as we killed the inhabitants of this plane," said the Beastie. His manner changed, and his face was lined with terrible humor, and a strange disgust. "That is why we put you in the cubicle. We cannot tolerate other forms of life. They are repulsive."

"Wait!" Orth cried hoarsely. He struggled to find a way from the cell. There was none.

"Goodbye, Angel," shrieked the army of small things, in perfect unison.

"Wait. . . !"

But the Beasties were already leaping through the window, four at a time, like dead rubber balls bouncing, bouncing down upon the world of Felix A. (for Assassin) Orth.

The Angel chained with invisible walls watches the world through his moving window. I did love the Earth and its people, he thinks impotently, I did love them but now I have done this.

He strains against the barrier he cannot see, knowing that there is no escape. And beyond the window, the Beasties frolick through the land, their soft-boiled-egg eyes full of mirth, and upon the face of the world, blood stands like pools of fallen rain. . . .

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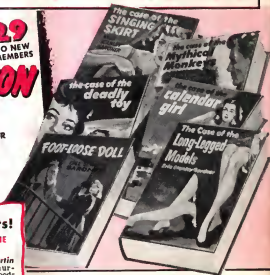
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